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AN ARTIST IN LIFE



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# An Artist in Life

*A Commentary on the Life and  
Works of Rabindranath Tagore*

47492

By  
Niharranjan Ray



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Inscribed  
to the memory of  
JAWAHARLAL NEHRU  
spiritual successor of the Artist  
and  
the great sentinel of our generation

Muskhilam Jawahar Lal Nehru on 20/5/65 - P330/2



## Preface

I planned this book more than fifteen years ago, wishing to see it published on the eve of the centenary year of the birth of Rabindranath Tagore which fell on 1961. But my efforts in this direction, because of pulls and pressures from various others, were not adequate to cope with this project; and had I not been invited by the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Kerala to deliver, as their first Tagore Professor (1962-63), a course of lectures on the theme of this book, I would have perhaps taken a much longer time to prepare even the first draft which served as the basis of this book in its present form. I have therefore every reason to feel grateful to the Vice-Chancellor and the authorities of the University of Kerala not only for the honour they have done me but also for their being instrumental in inducing me to prepare the final draft and then for their undertaking its publication.

At various stages in the preparation of this book I have derived willing and affectionate help and co-operation from a number of friends and colleagues. I must mention at least three of them: Professor A. Bhattacharya of the department of English, Presidency College, Calcutta; Dr. S. K. Banerjee of the department of English, Jogamaya Devi College, Calcutta; and Professor B. M. Chaudhuri of the department of Humanities, Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur. Mr. Pulinbihari Sen, assisted by Mr. Jagadindra Bhaumik, has kindly compiled the bibliography. Mr. Dipendranath Mitra has seen the book through the press, and in the process has also edited the final draft. I feel deeply obliged to them all.

Simla,  
14 November, 1967

NIHARRANJAN RAY





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PART ONE



## 1. Proposition

THOSE IN INDIA who have read him in the original and many of those who have known him through meagre and often inadequate translations, and have followed the evolution of his life and art, recognise the greatness of Rabindranath Tagore as a man and as an artist. The present author is one of them. But the testimony of an individual about the greatness of a person is notoriously unreliable, and it is only by applying some universally and intellectually acceptable tests that such greatness is to be measured.

In the course of her long history, India has known a number of men and women who have been recognized by her people as *mahat*, as great, not because someone in authority decreed that they were so, but because the people saw in them certain qualities, which have, throughout the ages, been acknowledged as attributes of *mahatva*, of greatness. An analysis of the records of the people's collective feelings and experiences, as scattered in literature and handed down to us through tradition, shows that, from ancient times, greatness was taken to be composed of certain more or less definite elements.

The first and the most important of such elements, it would appear, is the quality of *chakravartin*, spiritual or temporal, that is, the quality of overlordship of a wide and encircling world. The Buddha was regarded as a spiritual *chakravartin*, while Aśoka was acclaimed a *chakravartin* of the temporal world. In the case of an artist, a creative genius, it would, in contemporary terms, mean the comprehensiveness and versatility of his mind, the range of his creative faculties, the abundance of his creative output. It may be argued that these are merely quantitative elements. In fact, they are not. To a modern mind, as it was with the ancients, in India at any rate, the very variety, abundance, and extent of someone's creative works impart in them a qualitative significance. Indeed, the aesthetes of India of the early and late medieval ages regarded *prāchurya* or abundance and *vaichitrya* or variety as very significant qualities of a great artist, or, for that matter, of any great mind. New

and ever new and continuous blossoming is their definition of a creative genius.

A second element of greatness is that it grows naturally, organically. Indeed, tradition records that a genius develops, following the laws of nature, like a plant, an animal or a man; it is *jaiva*, of the nature, is natural; it has a story of evolution and conforms to its laws. To wake up one fine morning and discover oneself a creative genius is something unknown. The flowering of a genius is a process which must take time, and how much time it should take in any particular case is conditioned by various factors. But the process has to be gone through, and it is a continuous process, despite shocks, accidents, departures, etc., proceeding from stage to stage, phase to phase, acting and reacting constantly on one another. Indian tradition compares, almost invariably, a great man with a great spreading tree, and frequently with the banyan. The comparison is very apt, in more senses than one. This tree grows slowly, gradually, stage by stage, that is, organically, until it assumes a huge spreading form that sends down roots all around and creates new and fresh life. This is but one aspect. Another aspect is that it draws air and light and water from the enveloping atmosphere, sends them all down to the roots along its tubes and trunks, and then draws them all upwards in the form of sap which, eventually, blossoms forth into foliage, flowers and fruits. Still a third aspect is that a huge spreading *vanaspati*, lord of the forest, offers shade, shelter and sustenance to a multitude of creatures.

From what has just been said, it will be clear that a third element of greatness consists in the wholeness, in the overriding, and almost elemental unity of such organic evolution. Here, too, the comparison with the *vanaspati* is very apt. The greatness of the *vanaspati* does not lie in any of its parts or in this or that of its aspects, but it is in its *ensemble*, in the totality of the effect and impression that is produced by the essential and integral relatedness of its various parts and aspects with the whole. It may show faults and gaps here, marks of storm and stress there, unequalness or even maladjustments among its different aspects and segments (and these must necessarily be relevant points of discussion and analysis in any estimation of the totality), but despite all these there should be an integral,



an overriding unity that binds all its parts and aspects, all marks of fury and passion, of cracks and crevices into one unique whole. The works of a great artist, including his activities in other spheres of life, must be characterised by this natural and organic unity of the whole.

A fourth element of greatness is the unity and harmony between a person's creative activities and his day-to-day living. Indian tradition denies any dichotomy between art and life. Since, according to ancient and medieval Indian thought which Tagore made his own, art is but a means of cultivating one's own self, it could not be otherwise. From this it follows that to be recognised as great, one must evolve and subscribe to a total view of life, that is, to a way or philosophy of life that is potent and comprehensive enough to explain life's more significant and fundamental laws. Such a way or philosophy may be weak in logic here or wrong in its premises there, but on the whole it should be able to offer enough sustenance to make life vital and creative. There is a simple method by which the quality of a philosophy or way of life is tested: does it, when put into practice, dry up the *prāṇa* or vital life force from within, or does it offer continuous nourishment to all levels of existence? If it is the latter, then its required qualities are established.

It will be evident from what has just been said that mere knowing and subscribing to a way or philosophy of life, though important, are not considered enough, since these can be achieved intellectually, by study and apprehension of the accounts of the practice and realisation of others, past or contemporary—a process which is called *charchā* (root, *char* = to go forward). Indian tradition, however, lays much greater emphasis on *charyā* (which is derived from the same basic root and has the same meaning), that is, practice (*ācharaṇam*). In the present context, the evolving of a way or philosophy of life means that it is evolved through *charyā* or practice in the day-to-day living, through experience, real and imaginative, and subscribed to not merely by the intellect, but felt by the very core of one's being. Such a person is called *āchārya*, for his way of life, his philosophy, or his world view of things, is an integral part of his being and becoming, not merely a product of his intellectual knowledge. From this point of view, the life and art of a



creative artist are integral whole, art being an aspect, albeit the most important one, of the whole. Great art, from this point of view, is, therefore, the creation of one who is great as a person. The contrary is also true, but in a different sense: a great man is also a great artist, but in the sense that he is an artist in life, that he makes his personal life an object of art.

Yet a fifth aspect of greatness is the attribute of *prajñā* or wisdom which is but another name for profundity, reflected in and radiated by the specific way or philosophy of life referred to in the foregoing paragraphs. Wisdom comes from the experience, understanding and realisation of the different levels of human existence: these are in ascending order, first, the physical or nutritive (*annamaya*) and sensuous (*prānamaya*) levels, then the levels of intellect (*manomaya*) and understanding (*vijñānamaya*) and finally the joyous and blissful (*ānandamaya*) level, all operating at one and the same time in a fully integrated person. Artists, even those who are significant, stay usually at the first three levels, and, by doing so, are in a position to reveal the awareness of the nature of facts and things, and as such achieve wisdom or profundity of a sort. But there are also artists (Kālidāsa, Shakespeare, Goethe, Tolstoy, the author of the 'battle books' of the *Mahābhārata*, for example) who are capable of passing on to the next higher level of existence, that of understanding or *vijñāna*, where they develop a rare insight into, and a sort of intuitive knowledge of, the nature of reality, and reveal higher altitudes of life. Yet there are a few others, very rare though (the seer-composers of the lyric passages of the *Upanishads*, the authors of a few psalms of the Old Testament, the composers of a few of our medieval mystic songs,<sup>1</sup> to cite a few examples), who, in some rare moments of exaltation of the spirit, reflect and radiate joy, bliss, peace and harmony, and thereby affirm the experience, the understanding and the realisation of the highest level of human existence, the *ānandamaya*. This, the last, is the ultimate reach of human wisdom. The greatness of a life as much as of any art lies in its reflection and radiation of the awareness of and insight into the different

<sup>1</sup> This is a finding of Tagore, and he draws attention to the high and pure poetic awareness of reality of many a passage of the medieval mystics. In a very well-known address he quotes a poem by Rajjab, a Moslem saint, as an example of the noblest, the purest and the highest poetry he had known.

levels of existence, including the last one in the ascending and descending order. The ascent and the descent, it should be pointed out, are a continuous and often a simultaneous process.

These five traditional aspects or elements of greatness I will seek to trace in Tagore, sometimes directly, at other times by implication and interpretation. To what extent I succeed in my aim will be for the readers to judge.

## 2

Speaking in a summary manner, human life is a synoptical recapitulation of natural life. Therefore, the method I will follow in this study will be naturalistic in the first instance, that is, I will tell the story of the evolution of the mind and art of Tagore in much the same way as one would trace the story of the growth of a great tree or a mountain range. The exceptional features that are noticed may be accounted for in the following manner: though the laws of natural life govern human life generally, yet it has an autonomous sphere of existence where certain other laws operate. Man is endowed with reason, a conscious will or volition, and an individual psyche. Moreover, to a very large extent, individual thought and action are socially conditioned and determined. In the case of an artist, history and tradition, social environs, heredity, collective psyche, will and action, etc. help him, for example, to select his themes, to choose his words and phrases, to rear up his images and symbols, to evolve his ideas and ideologies, indeed, his total way and pattern of creative life and work. In the second instance, therefore, the method that will be followed in presenting the narrative of the poet's life and work would be sociological. Indeed, this method presupposes that human life, howsoever autonomous, is, to a considerable extent, conditioned and determined by social factors. We need not assume that Tagore was any exception to this general rule, in spite of the uniqueness of his great personality. Because of this, my appraisal throughout will also be sociological.

It would be apparent from what has just been said that the method envisaged goes much beyond what is generally understood by academic literary criticism, based on the textual notions

of literary art and aesthetics. Not that such notions and standards are of no count; they have their place, since their application to creative techniques and forms heightens our consciousness, but they are not enough for the understanding of a great creative personality, so complex and commanding as Tagore's. All great creative expressions, in the ultimate analysis, afford a study in values, since the responses to them of the people of contemporary and future generations defy all known standards of literary criticism and aesthetics, and are conditioned and determined by the system of values in respect of literature and art, morals and religions, and social, political and economic awareness in which they find themselves. And this is true not merely of the people's responses but also of the creative process of the poet and the artist. Indeed, even the rhyme or rhythm he adopts for a lyric or the tone and tune he sets for a song, for example, are ultimately determined by his system of values. The study envisaged will, therefore, be a study in the system of values that Tagore inherited and in which he was nurtured, of values he came to adopt or transform or came into clash with, of values he slowly built up and established.

## 3

Tagore's life and art are so varied and extensive that it is not easy to grasp them, let alone pass judgement upon them. We may compare both with a huge forest, spreading and sprawling, where one can see tiny plants and winding creepers, towering and overshadowing trees, a forest full of sap, colour and beauty, sublime in its silent immensity. But, once we are inside the forest, all this majesty disappears, because then we can see only the plants and the creepers and the trees, separately. Whereas if we see it from outside, from a distance, we do certainly feel the majesty but the charm and beauty of the separate trees and of their multitudinous foliage, their flowers and fruits, and their colours are lost.

How, then, are we to find our way in this dense and vast forest of Tagore's creative output? Should we search for some central rhythm, for some principle of spiritual unity, and then relate all the abundance to this unity? Some reviewers have



attempted to do so, but the attempt does not seem to have yielded much. Let us continue with our metaphor of the forest. If we are careful never to step out of the beaten track as we explore its depths, are we not in danger of missing all the magic and the beauty and the colour and the sound that we might come across in remote spots? And there are so many tracks, some of them dim and indistinct perhaps, but all are equally enchanting. It is surely unwise to insist on choosing only one of them.

Instead, then, of trying to reduce Tagore's works to a doubtful process of simplified unity, we should search for some perspective which will include all its variety and yet give us a whole view of it. The historical approach will, I believe, give us such a perspective.

Tagore's life, as I have said before, pursues a course of evolution, and all its various phases are reflected clearly in his creative works. This evolution, we must be careful to remember, is not simple or straightforward; there is no smooth progress from phase to phase, but very often it is repetitious with sudden twists and tortuousnesses. If at one stage of his life he is under the sway of some dominant idea or mood or passion or emotion, the next stage may not, as we might expect, show any further development of this mood or that nostalgia, but a violent swinging away from it, even an impatient repudiation of its sway, which, in its turn, may be followed by the domination of another mood or passion. This spiral of domination by an idea or an emotion or a passion, followed by a rebellion against it, seems to govern the motion of his poetry, if we may describe the whole movement of his evolution in such abstract language.

Such an evolution can have no destination. The poet ever fares forward, and the home he yearns for even in his early youth will elude him all his life. In a beautiful poem, in *Sonâr Tari* (The Golden Boat, 1894), he imagines his life as a golden boat floating on the sea of time and guided by a strange and beautiful woman. All day he has been sailing, and now there is no light but the darkening shadows of night. When he asks her where they will go, she only smiles and points to the sea, throbbing restlessly, and to the infinite western horizon. The mysterious woman, the Ideal Beauty who guides his life, does not answer his question; the poet tries to find an answer all his

life but never succeeds, it seems. Indeed one may wonder if to succeed was ever his aim; it may not have been his concern at all.

It is an ancient and respectable practice in literary criticism to insist on discovering great philosophy in great art. I would warn off such expectants at the outset, because, to my mind, Tagore the artist is much more important than Tagore the philosopher. It would perhaps be possible to write an academic dissertation on his philosophy, make learned and subtle speculations on the influence of Indian and Western philosophy on his ideas, or even, as some have actually done, make him out to be the author of an original philosophy altogether. But in doing so we only impoverish the rich world that Tagore has created in his art, we divest it of all life and colour, and turn all the plenty and vitality into a tedious and lifeless abstraction. Besides, I have always felt that he never attempted or claimed to have built any philosophical system.

One often forgets that to study the works of Tagore as so many fragments is to do violence to their integrity. His genius must be grasped as a whole, understood in its development, stage by stage. Only thus shall we be able to appreciate the separate pieces properly. Torn apart from the background of his art as a whole, they lose much of their meaning. For, what is his art but the reflection of a magnificent, dynamic and multi-coloured personality? To study and interpret Tagore's evolving personality through his creative works, that must be the interpreter's duty.

From another point of view also it is necessary to realise this wholeness of Tagore's personality and art. We come across many inconsistencies and self-contradictions in his works if we study them in a fragmentary fashion. But these disappear, indeed, the fragments fall into necessary groupings in a dynamic and complex pattern, if only we can see this pattern, if, that is, we are able to study his work as a unity. No one in Indian history has perhaps penetrated deeper into human consciousness than Tagore, and along with the deepening of this penetration, his ideas and feelings, even his language, were bound to change. Without this change, this power of mobile response, his soul would petrify. Even to the same object the poet reacts differently at different times; his emotions increase

in depth and range, and his attitude to the object changes. Sometimes we see the poet brooding and idealising, lost in contemplation, sometimes again his soul flows outwards, is attached to external objects, and he is absorbed in sensuous delight. In the organic world life appears to manifest itself and develop in an apparently chaotic jumble, but order is revealed as soon as we learn the laws of biology. Tagore's poetry, the variety of which seems to be so confusing, obeys a law of this kind, a profound natural order and we have only to discover it.

Poetry, as we all know, is a very complex and manifold combination: of rhyme and rhythm and sound, of words with all their meanings and associations, of mental and external images, of tradition and habits of thought and feeling, of intellect and emotion and sensation, of consciousness of the past, present, and future, of freedom and necessity. All these apparently unconnected attributes cluster round the complicated thing we call poetry. And, unifying and interpenetrating all these, is the creative unity of the poet's personality. Tagore's art is the inner union of all these factors by means of the poet's sensibility, the harmony produced by this coming together of the internal and the external. It does not exist in any of the separate ingredients, but each of these is indispensable in order to call forth the poet's creation. We will seek to analyse its separate constituents and their interrelations, and also the manner in which they combine with the poet's soul. Such an analysis, since it gives us a better insight into poetry, has its value, but we must not forget the precise purpose of such analysis in our plan of study.

It is, therefore, important to investigate the nature of Tagore's artistic sensibility, to arrive, by studying and exploring his works, at a knowledge of the inner laws according to which his personality evolved.

Any such study will have to be broadly historical, because only such an approach, by revealing the stages of the poet's being and becoming, can give us a satisfactory idea of the man. It cannot afford to neglect either the external factors in this evolution or a full analysis of the poet's personal and social milieu and the part it played in shaping his mind and personality. But our main preoccupation will be to follow the changing phases in the evolution of his personality, to study



the process of its unfoldment, and to see the artist and his works as a whole.

## 4

What, then, should be the plan of the study I have in view?

There are several ways of proceeding with this study, and one would serve as well as another so long as it keeps to the method I have outlined above and attempts, in the light of the scheme set forth, to bring out the nature and quality of the mind and personality of Tagore.

It is perhaps convenient to start with a short but critical account of the background against which Tagore made his appearance on the stage of contemporary history. This account would cover not only the ideas and ideologies, and the socio-political and cultural milieu of more than half-a-century before and immediately after his birth, but also the literary tradition and his immediate family atmosphere and environment.

This may be followed by an interpretation of the major ideological and intellectual forces, emanating from Indian as well as Western tradition and thoughts, that he imbibed and that influenced him in his formative and maturer years, indeed right up to the very last phase of his life. Such influences went to the building up of, nourishing and sustaining, his mind, his psyche, his will, indeed, his whole personality.

Then, there is the entire complex of contemporary life and its movements, in India and abroad, to which he had exposed himself throughout his life. An analytical study of this complex and the poet's reactions and responses to them are also likely to reveal certain important traits and tendencies that characterised his mind and personality.

With this material at the back of our mind we may proceed to narrate the story of the poet's life and works in the form of a running interpretative commentary, phase by phase, with one phase gliding into the next, either driven by the poet's inner compulsion or by external stimuli or in accordance with the laws of evolution, or as a result of all these factors working together. Thirty years ago, I attempted such an interpretative phasing of the poet's life and works, to which I gave a fuller version

immediately after his death<sup>1</sup>. Other writers on Tagore have also, in the meantime, attempted similar phasing with but slight variations here and there in respect of dates and naming of the phases. It is significant that none has failed to notice that the poet's life and works fall very easily into certain more or less well-defined phases or periods, each characterised by more or less equally well-defined searchings and experiments, attitudes and approaches. Having regard to the space at my disposal, I propose to present here a revised version of the major phases of the evolution of the mind and personality of the poet:

Germination: Early Blossoms (1872-1888)

Fruits of Maturity (1889-1900)

Fruits for Offering (1901-1913)

The Nest and the Sky (1914-1925)

New Life: New Flowers (1926-1937)

The Sunset Glow (1931-1941)

Admittedly, variations are possible with but slight inclination of the dates upwards or downwards, but whatever the inclination, the dates would not be definitive, because of the very nature of the subject, but only indicative of the characteristic trends and tendencies of the respective phases. More detailed phasing or further breaking up of the phases is also possible, for the sake of convenience and perhaps also for better understanding. But, for our purpose, that, I believe, is not necessary. The names suggested for the phases are self-explanatory and are frankly interpretative. From Germination to Fruits for Offering the order is clearly one of natural evolution, from the sapling to the slowly growing and spreading tree, at its fullest maturity, laden heavy and bent with the ripened fruits of life.

But, then, the wide world takes notice and enters into the sap. Inevitably life takes a new turn; it provides a nest for the world, at the same time it goes out to greet it. But nature has its own way of operation, and, slowly but inevitably, as life takes on the long twilight glow—sweet, nostalgic and radiant—the sap, because of new experiences of distant horizons, comes to feel the pulsation of a new consciousness, the stirrings of a new life,

<sup>1</sup> *Rabindra-Sāhityer Bhūmika* (An Introduction to the literary works of Rabindranath Tagore), Calcutta. First published, 1937. 5th edition, 1963.



as it were, in defiance of the natural law of growth and decay. At seventy, bent with age, the poet takes a new lease of life and, for more than ten years, till all lights fade out on 7 August, 1941, he is young again with eyes and ears open and alert, a mind as responsive and a psyche as sensitive as in the fullest maturity of life. At eighty-one he dies early in life, proving once more that, though generally held and governed by natural law, life has yet an autonomous existence governed as much by the individual will and personal reason and psyche as by the laws of social growth.

Having narrated the story of his creative life and works, I propose to undertake an analysis of the poet's total view of life and his aesthetic ideas as revealed in his writings, creative and otherwise. His personal faith and the religion of man, as understood and enunciated by him, are also integrals of this total view of life and art; and they were determined and conditioned, in a very large measure and in an unceasing process of evolution, as much by the poet's background, his inheritance and his reactions and responses to contemporary life and movements as by his personal will and psyche. A comprehension of this total view of life and art is, I believe, necessary for an understanding of his evolving mind and personality.

Such views, attitudes and approaches as I have been speaking of were also responsible for determining and conditioning certain major traits and tendencies of his character and personality. We must, therefore, attempt at having an idea of them as well. In later years, some of the aspects of his aesthetic faith, of his total view of life, and of his basic attitudes and approaches came to face certain questions and challenges thrown up by a new age and by new personal experiences, but no question or challenge was overpowering enough to oblige him to reject or disown his fundamental faiths or even to lay them aside. It is, therefore, necessary to have an intellectual appreciation of these essentials of the poet's nature and character; although I do not raise the question of accepting or rejecting them.

Tagore was, both as a cultured person and as a poet, deeply rooted in the cultural tradition of India which he came to re-interpret, add to and enrich in the light of his own evolving ideas and experiences and those of the age he belonged to. To be able to do this, he had to study, analyse and think over

the facts and features of the history of this tradition so that he might know which seeds still had their potency and which had lost it and needed to be weeded out. In a word, he had to discover India for himself before he could have a clear vision of her cultural tradition and set out to build up the India of that vision. The process of this discovery, the main lineaments of the vision, and the principles he came to apply to the task of reinterpretation and enrichment of our tradition are all of a piece with his mind and personality, and we cannot afford to miss an opportunity to take a look at them.

Another important aspect of his mind and personality lies in the experimental work that he undertook in the field of social reconstruction and the ideas and ideologies that inspired and motivated them. Rehabilitation of our villages and our rural economy, cooperative movement, working out new principles and methods, and evolving a national system of education, ideas and speculations on the contemporary political life in India, on nationalism and internationalism, these are again all of a piece with his mind and personality, and there is no reason why one should ignore them on the ground of his being essentially a poet and an artist. Art and poetry, speculative ideas on religion, ethics, aesthetics and metaphysics, experimental work in the field of education and social reconstruction, participation in politics and engagement with issues concerning man and his world, for instance, are all but parts or segments of his being and becoming which are one and indivisible. An understanding of his social thought is, therefore, essential for a fuller appreciation of such a rounded personality as that of Tagore.

I propose to conclude with a sketch, however inadequate and imperfect, of the image of Tagore that lies impressed on my mind. There my aim will be to present my personal evaluation of the nature and character of his mind and personality for whatever it is worth.

## 2. The Background

ONE CANNOT fully understand the mind and personality of Rabindranath Tagore, his works and his contribution to culture, unless one sees him against the literary, social and political background that prevailed in this country when he was born. We cannot over-emphasise the fact that Tagore was not a solitary luminary in the firmament of the nineteenth century Bengal. He was born in an atmosphere which was full of the greatest promise; he came into a tradition of great literary achievements, in Sanskrit as well as in his own language, Bengali. By his works he enriched this tradition immensely and gave it a new direction. Through him the culture of Bengal and, for that matter, of India became a world force, and the award of the Nobel Prize to him in 1913 was no more than a recognition of this fact. But it will be wrong to imagine that before Tagore modern Indian culture had no contact with the outside world. Some forty years before he began to write, Indian thought, through the efforts of Rammohan Roy, had been linked with the intellectual movements in the West. In fact, the most remarkable feature of modern Indian culture, if we date its history from about 1814 when Rammohan started his activities, is its international content and orientation. It is, indeed, a product of a unique synthesis of ancient and medieval Indian cultures with the culture of modern Europe. Immeasurably taller than all his predecessors, Tagore only accepted and enriched this tendency towards synthesis, invested it with new elements, and, above all, imparted to it a dynamism which has not spent itself even today. Before him our national culture lacked articulation and cohesion. There was sincere admiration abroad for India's achievements in the past; men like Rammohan Roy and Kesavchandra Sen had taught the thinking people in the West to respect India's spiritual greatness. But it was Tagore who first stood forward as the spokesman of a great and living national culture, and encouraged a living intercourse between India and the world. It was he who, during a crisis in the history of our culture, laid down the path that it was to follow; for, shortly



after he began to write, our artists and intellectuals were faced with two sharply posed alternatives. On the one hand, there was the path chalked out by Rammohan Roy and Isvarchandra Vidyasagar, the path of synthesis between India and the West; on the other, there grew an acute revulsion against Western culture, the first expression of nascent nationalism being an uncritical reassertion of the glory of India's past, combined, as a corollary, with an uncritical denunciation of everything foreign. It was the weight of Tagore's choice that settled which alternative was to direct and dominate our culture. Tagore chose the Rammohan-Vidyasagar line, and thus saved it not only from decay but assured its ordered progress.

It is necessary here to emphasise a few broad facts and to sketch an outline, however imperfect, of the social and cultural tradition that Tagore inherited. It was a tradition rich as well as diverse, and a brief summary which is attempted here can at best give only a partial view of it. Indian history was settling down into a kind of stability when Tagore was born (1861), but this was preceded by a period full of convulsions and tensions arising out of the conflict between the foreign invaders of the country and the old rulers, not all of whom had been completely subjugated. The so-called Sepoy Mutiny (1857) was followed by a total crushing of all oppositions, but at the same time new forces of opposition were forming and the equilibrium that seemed to be so stable a few years after was actually as temporary as it was illusory. The year 1860 is important for national as well as international reasons; it introduced a decade during which the alignment of world powers was drastically transformed, new rivalries were born and, especially in the East, there began a history of social change which had hardly any parallel in the past. From one aspect Tagore's Bengal fully shared the stability which we associate with Victorian England; and both Bengal and India were subject to the same disintegrating forces that broke up the Victorian quietude.

In Indian history, it is customary to refer to the period, roughly from 1815 to 1860, as the period of Renaissance. There is some point in the analogy between the birth of modern Indian culture and the Revival of Learning in Europe, but we must remember from the beginning the limitations of this analogy. The European Renaissance was the product of an organic

evolution, the result of the pressures and explosions of internal forces and the impact of external forces. This is not equally true of our country where the purely external motives and forces seem to have been and indeed actually were more prominent than the necessity of organic and inherent growth. The cultural revolution that undoubtedly followed the first years of the British conquest had no roots in past history. Indian culture in the centuries that immediately preceded the British occupation was slow-moving, if not static, though it was based on certain essential values. It required the transfusion of new blood from outside to quicken its tempo of life and make it dynamic. When we speak of the nineteenth century renaissance, Indian or Bengali, we must not lose sight of this sovereign limitation which gives to most of its manifestations a somewhat shoddy character.

Not that this disparagement applies to the achievements of those giant builders of modern India, of whom Rammohan was the first. Rammohan was very susceptible to Western influences, but his roots were deep in India's past, and he achieved a synthesis which was so far beyond the average social consciousness of the time that after his death it partially disappeared, and constructive work had to begin anew. And this has been the tragedy of our contemporary middle class. Deprived, on account of historical circumstances, of organic and national sustenance, it had to depend mainly on foreign resources. Its fortunes have always depended on developments controlled by a foreign power. As a result, the distinction between urban and rural cultures has been sharper in India than in the West, and, despite conscious attempts at synthesis, a large segment of our national culture has developed in complete isolation from the life of the people as a whole.

In Rammohan's case—and Rammohan was the first spokesman of the new middle class, of its urge for freedom, knowledge and power—this isolation was qualified, however, by his emphasis on the continuity between the new religion he preached and the ancient Hinduism which he never laid aside. He stood forth as the unrelenting opponent of the christianisation of the country and infused the new revolutionary liberalism of Europe into Hinduism. In doing so he was far ahead of the average Hindu, so far ahead that the effect of his religious revolution did not percolate beyond the upper strata of the contemporary

society. Brāhmos<sup>1</sup> (followers of Rammohan who believed in one Supreme Reality, the *Brahman*) are often compared with the Puritans, but European Protestantism was a popular movement and represented a social upheaval, as a result of which the whole medieval structure went to pieces. Nothing like this happened in India. Compared with the Protestant movement, the Brāhmo movement did not produce more than a ripple on the surface of the larger contemporary society, and the mass of the people were undisturbed by Rammohan's polemics with the Christian missionaries on the one hand and with the orthodox Hindus on the other. It must be admitted, however, that the movement acted as a powerful lever to all progressive ideas and movements initiated and organised by the intellectual middle-class.

Thus, from the beginning, the middle-class culture was established in isolation from the traditional currents of social life. In the years that followed, as the new middle class became more extensive, this isolation was partially qualified, but our society and culture still bear its marks.

Rammohan's work requires a more detailed reference than we can attempt here, because he was one of the poet's spiritual progenitors. Through his polemical tracts he was a pioneer in education and in the new learning, in social reforms and also in Bengali language and literature. He was prominently associated with the foundation of the Hindu College, but the opposition of the orthodox Hindus debarred him from the membership of its organising committee. He ran an Anglo-Hindu school, where the course of instruction included mechanics, astronomy, Voltaire, and Euclid. He also established, in 1825, a Vedānta College, where he 'tried to combine the teaching of Oriental learning with Western arts and science'. His most important historical significance lies in his breaking away, consciously, from the static feudal habits of thought, in his allegiance to the revolutionary philosophy and ideals bequeathed by the French Revolution. In an interview with the Frenchman Jacquemont, in a discussion with Sandford Merton, and again in a letter to Crawford, dated 18 August 1828, he expressed

<sup>1</sup> A theistic socio-religious body, mainly protestant in outlook and approach in respect of traditional Hinduism.



the view, almost prophetic, that India would one day be free from the British tutelage, and that English rule would create a new middle class which would lead the fight for freedom. Even while he was living at Rangpur as a subordinate clerk in the Collectorate, he took a lively interest in foreign affairs, and Digby, his official superior, testifies that he showed admiration for Napoleon, which he however abandoned after the French Consul had turned into a tyrant. He was successful in bringing out many newspapers, and in the eighteen twenties he discussed through their columns current problems like the Chinese question, the Greek struggle and the plight of Ireland under the regime of absentee landlords. When he heard of the July Revolution in France in 1830, he 'could think and talk of nothing else'.

Far ahead of his time, Rammohan outstripped the understanding of his contemporaries, and it was not till nearly half a century later that his intellectual and spiritual achievements entered into the nation's cultural heritage. The shoddiness which I have described as disfiguring most of the manifestations of the so-called Indian renaissance can be seen most clearly in the activities of the Young Bengal group, reared by the brilliant and eccentric Anglo-Indian, Derozio, a younger contemporary of Rammohan. Derozio joined the Hindu College in May 1826, when he was only seventeen, and attracted round him a brilliant band of students. A historian of the period calls them radicals, and this is an apt description. They stood far to the left of Rammohan, advocated the total scrapping of the Indian tradition, and were uncompromising champions of the French Revolution, of its basic tenets like individual liberty and the sovereignty of the individual.

There was much that was reckless and absurd in their activities, and although they were all brilliant men of talents, they have not left behind any permanent achievement. Alienation and isolation were more pronounced in their case than in Rammohan's, and from the very beginning they drew upon themselves the organised wrath of the supporters of tradition. This of course deflected them from constructive activity, and it became a more immediate business to defend themselves from the attacks of the reactionaries. The whole impetus was spent in this controversy, and the great ideas which these men championed and tried to carry out in practice were still-born. As early as

1838, they set up a Society for the Acquisition of General Knowledge, which was followed next year by a Mechanical Institute, when in this country there was no mechanical industry whatever. The Young Bengal group of the Derozians stood, to the end of their days, steadfast at the van of all social and political movements. They were a band of heroes, but in the historically enforced isolation which they had to face, the permanent marks they have left on our culture are small. Sovereignty of the individual—their most cherished ideal—was so utterly alien to Indian society and traditional ideology, so utterly divorced from the realities of the Indian social life that, even today, it has not been fully accepted, and although Tagore made some daring experiments with this idea, he never carried it as far as the Jacobins of the thirties did.

Rammohan Roy died in 1833. In the next generation of the middle class, a certain definiteness worked itself out from amidst the conflicting tendencies, a product of the movement launched by Rammohan but modified and twisted by the opposition. Rammohan was no moderate; but in the generation that followed him, some of his immediate disciple and erstwhile opponents joined hands to form a moderate group and to oppose the Jacobins of Young Bengal. Devendranath Tagore (1817-95), the poet's father, represented the Rammohan line, but with a greater admixture of ancient and classical Indian tradition. At the opposite end was the flamboyant figure of Madhusudan Dutt (1824-73), arch-heretic and a convert to Christianity, the man who was the first to enrich Bengali poetry with English, Latin, Greek, and Italian influences. The great Isvarchandra Vidyasagar (1820-91) stood midway, and his connection with the people was more intimate than the others'. Coming from the lower middle class, he carried forward the Rammohan tradition of social reform, of popular education, and of the revolt against the obsolescent feudal ideology in which the Bengali society had been vegetating. Thus, during 1833-60, there had been many factors and influences at work, all originating in the pioneer work of Rammohan, all branching out towards different directions, seemingly dissimilar but with a common tendency. The great tradition over which Tagore came to preside was a composite and synthetic product of this variety.



Two more figures that must be mentioned are Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (1838-94) and Dinabandhu Mitra (1828-73). Bankimchandra was the greatest among the Bengali intellectuals; to his own countrymen he was and still is better known as a novelist. His novels, particularly those written in his second and third phases, are coloured by keen social criticism, a criticism based on deep and searching reflection, on vast historical and scientific erudition and inspired by a restless thirst for synthesis between Indian and European cultures, both of which he had deeply imbibed. He was even aware of the contemporary European socialist movements, and in his social essays he applied some of their tenets to the social and economic conditions in India, a task which no one else had attempted before and few have performed so well since. The tragedy of the Bengali middle class, of which I have spoken already, is best symbolised by Bankimchandra who could never honestly reconcile the conflict between the Indian feudal tradition, of which Hinduism was the best exponent, and the idea of Western progress, which he derived from Comte, Spencer, Mill, and Fourier, and which, had he accepted its conclusions, would condemn as worthless and stagnant by far the larger part of the Indian feudal tradition which he so loved. The conflict became irreconcilable with wider and deeper study, and in an attempt to solve it he came to accept premises instinct with the most dangerously reactionary import. The novel, *Devī Chaudhurānī*, the theological dissertations, *Dharmatattva* (lit. the message of Hindu religion) and *Krishnacharitra* (lit. the character of Krishna), and the social essays *Sāmya* (Equality) and *Bānglār Kṛishak* (the Bengali Peasant) show the three tendencies which remained unresolved in him: *first*, the backward, reactionary worship of an idealised Indian past, the desperate illusion that, although times had changed, that ideal could remain valid with only minor alterations; *second*, the intellectual craving for finding scientific validity for instinctive preferences; and *third*, a thoroughly revolutionary social outlook of the most radically democratic content.

Was Bankim himself aware of this triple contradiction, was he aware that any attempt to solve it would only enmesh him in still more insoluble contradictions, that the logical conclusions of what he had premised in the novel and theological disserta-

tions, referred to above, would produce a narrow-minded, sectarian outlook which would have nothing in common with the humanist ideals of either Comte or Fourier or with those of the ancient and classical Indian tradition? Of all the figures of this age Bankimchandra is the most complex and interesting. In spite of his great achievements (he was the first to create artistic Bengali prose, to write subtle intellectual disquisitions in Bengali, to give to Bengali literature and culture a vast international content enriched with ideas from science, history, sociology, philosophy, theology and aesthetics), in spite of his great achievements, he was a tragic figure when seen in the context of contemporary ideologies in conflict. To say this is not to condemn him, for tragedy was but inevitable in the circumstances which produced our new middle class. But at the same time it must be pointed out that the result of this tragedy has been disastrous, and the contradictions, with which he was confronted and which he could not solve, have repeatedly stultified the culture of modern India. They have resisted revolutionary changes when such changes were essential for the progress of our culture and, although an undercurrent of dynamism has always been there (to prove this we have the works of Tagore), Indian culture as a whole has found its way blocked by chasms at either end. In more concrete terms, our culture has remained progressive and reactionary at the same time, and so has advanced less rapidly than our political progress.

The years from 1814 to 1860 saw India's complete subjugation by the British, and, astonishing as it may seem today, this was welcomed on the whole by the new middle class. The quelling of the so-called Sepoy Mutiny (the word 'mutiny', it is recognised today, is a misnomer, for what took place was far bigger than a mere military rebellion and had the support of practically the entire people, except the middle class and those sections of the feudal class which owed their existence and prosperity to the British rule, the 'landed aristocracy' in Bengal, for example) was welcomed by the Hindu middle class, who cherished the illusion that the historical function of the British was to wipe out the Mughal Empire after which, somehow, they would become the ruling power. This illusion received classic expression in Bankimchandra's *Ānandamath*, in which Swāmī Satyānanda, leader of a popular revolt, was assured by an oracle,

after the failure of the revolt, that the defeat was only temporary and that in the next stage the old Hindu empire would be re-established in its pristine glory.

It would be short-sighted not to recognise in this illusion a deep revolutionary content. There was no passive faith in the benevolence of the British rule; on the contrary, there was a militant assertion of the national right to freedom. The identification of the nation with the Hindus was, at this stage, inevitable, when no Muslim middle class had yet emerged, when the Muslim aristocracy had been practically eliminated, and when the mass of the people, Hindu and Muslim alike, were quite inarticulate. This militant assertion of the national right to freedom, culturally speaking, found its best and deepest expression in Bankimchandra, and he became, despite his being an official in the British administrative machinery, the arch-priest and prophet of Indian nationalism. One of the first two graduates of Calcutta University, fed and nourished by Western thought and education, he was destined to become, indirectly though, one of the first grave-diggers of the British empire.

Once the national awareness was born, in however rudimentary and distorted a form, its development was strikingly rapid. Doubtless it received a new impetus from the great battles which the Bengali peasants began to fight from this time on against the tyranny of the landlord. The middle class immediately identified itself with the cause of the oppressed peasants, supporting it with ideologists.

Even before the Mutiny, the British Indian Association had been founded (1851) by a group of intellectuals and politically advanced people who were beginning, vaguely, to be aware of the humiliation of slavery to a foreign power. This Association was the father of the Indian National Congress (1885), and the immediate cause of its foundation was the famous Black Acts controversy. The Black Acts were intended to establish the equality of 'white' and 'black' peoples before the law, and they produced frenzied opposition from Europeans. The controversy brought on the surface the subordinate and humiliating position of 'black' Indians as against their 'white' masters, and thus certain issues, which were to gather and become more complicated in the subsequent decades, were for the first time raised by the Indians. Bankimchandra's writings contain many bitter



references to the degradation of India. The recognition that all this was due to foreign rule, and the growth of the national awareness, of the urge for national freedom, developed rapidly as the imperialist policy unfolded itself. The middle class began its most vital historical task: articulation of national consciousness. Imitation of the English, so long the mode and sign of the highest intellectual enlightenment, ceased to be considered so, and there was a conscious and aggressive return to the national tradition. Great scholars began for the first time to write the real history of India, and to discover facts and data, revealing a glory of which the British historians of India, who so long monopolised the writing of Indian history, gave no indication.

The year 1857-58 was a crucial one. It saw the final consolidation of the British conquest of India, and the establishment of the three Universities of Calcutta, Madras and Bombay. It also saw the rise of the first batch of fighters against the British rule, namely, the middle class, brought into being, nourished and sustained by the same British rule. The scientific knowledge, the equipment of modern education supplied by the British for their own ends, began producing results exactly contrary to what they had expected and planned for. The middle class, inspired by such knowledge and education, became implacably hostile to the foreign rule.

The famous indigo-agitation since 1859-60 and the militant sympathy and collaboration which the peasants received from the middle class are symptomatic. There had been revolts of the peasantry before this, but they received neither support nor recognition from the middle class. Now the battle was fought, whether this was recognised or not, on a national plane. The peasants' battle against the tyranny of the English indigo planters came to symbolise, even if unconsciously, the national battle against the British mastery.

The movement produced one of the most powerful dramatic classics we have in the Bengali language, *Nildarpan*, by Dinabandhu Mitra, an official in the Postal Department. Madhusudan Dutt translated it into English. It was published under the name of the Rev. Mr. Long, who was promptly hauled up before the court, and the prosecution gave an occasion for a grim and tenacious battle between the Indians and the English.

The *Hindu Patriot*, ably edited by Harischandra Mukherji, took up the cause of the peasants ardently, and Mukherji worked day and night to support and guide the struggle. Long was fined Rs. 1,000/- by the English judge; a friend paid it up on the spot.

Thus, in the years 1850 to '60 was formed the national awareness, which gave rise to a concrete urge for freedom. The Indian middle class was now strong enough to draw away from Western culture and stand on its own. It repudiated the old allegiance to the British and began to turn away from the tendency to depend on Europe for the components of its own culture. Love of the West was replaced by a bellicose return to India's past and by an attempt to build up a self-sufficient national culture. Properly speaking, if there was ever a renaissance in Bengal, it dates from this decade.

The national awareness and the rejection of cultural slavery did not mean that our culture became provincial and sectarian. On the contrary, as Bankimchandra's writings show, contact with the West was never more healthy, fruitful and deep, for there was now an organised attempt to integrate into the national culture whatever wealth was available from outside. And new sources of wealth began to be tapped. Literary and historical researches by men like Rajendralal Mitra (1822-91) revealed the cultural greatness of our ancient and medieval history, and the great *Vaishnava* lyrics with their humanist tradition came to be discovered. Islamic learning had never completely died out; renewed attention now came to be paid to Arabic and Persian poetry, mainly Sufistic, rich in emotional content and religious inspiration.

At the same time, we must repeat, the contradiction, in which this middle class culture was rooted, revealed itself more acutely, and there was no longer a homogenous ideology. Traces of this disintegration that we noticed in Bankimchandra revealed themselves more clearly on other planes, such as the religious. The *Brāhmo Samāj*, already broken by a schism, had to face a new schism in 1878, when the left radicals founded the *Sādhārān Brāhmo Samāj*. Its tenets indicated a more sweeping break with the past. The founders and organisers came from the lower middle class, with strong democratic aspirations, and the Bengali organ of this *Samāj* declared in 1882 that the object

of the *Sādhārṇ Brāhmo Samāj* was not only religious revolution but universal liberation and democratic republicanism. At the other end stood the neo-Hindus with a measure of support from Bankimchandra who presumably formulated some of the basic doctrines of this movement.

Neo-Hinduism hated the *Brāhmo* movement with frenzy, and opposed social reform. The orthodox society sought to rationalise its resistance, and even Bankimchandra did likewise. His theological works were basically rationalisations of this conservative resistance to progress. His glorification of the Rajput heroes resisting an alien, that is the Muslim, domination, gave the neo-Hindu movement its political theme, and this was the first expression of a tendency which characterised a section of the Indian national cultural movement and persisted till its last phase: the tendency to identify the nation with the Hindus and rank among the enemies not only the foreign rulers but also the Muslims. We meet another inherent limitation of our middle class culture which, if it is not as strong as it was, exists even today. On the one hand, there is in it an ardent, genuine and progressive humanist content, while, on the other, this humanist and progressivist attitude has been sought to be limited almost exclusively to Hinduism and to Hindu culture. This sectarian limitation was destined ultimately to pronounce disaster, when a Muslim middle class also emerged, slowly but inevitably. But this, however, belongs to much later history.

We see, then, that Tagore appeared on the stage of Indian history at a time when our culture was full of promise. The expanding middle class, the dominant minority of our people, was experiencing a national consciousness such as it had never done before, and that experience was slowly making itself articulate not merely in literary and intellectual activities but also in socio-political matters. Medieval orthodoxy and feudal obscurantism were gradually being rejected by an increasing sense of power and freedom of the individual man. Western science and philosophy, literature and education were increasingly bringing the modern world to our doors and drawing us, physically, intellectually and spiritually, out of our small medieval shells. A new world was beckoning all sensitive souls, at any rate in Bengal, to deeper, wider and fuller experiences of life, and frantic attempts were being made in various direc-



tions to find out as many channels of experience and expression as possible. Political enslavement and economic helplessness, resulting inevitably in failures and frustrations, tended only to sharpen the middle-class sensitivity and to quicken their intellectual and emotional sensibility.

During the second and third quarters of the nineteenth century, it is this sharpened sensitivity and quickened sensibility that chiefly characterised the Tagore family of Calcutta.

Having discoursed, very briefly though, on the socio-political milieu of the age, I will now make a brief survey of the literary situation of the time, for it is chiefly through literature that Tagore expressed his art, his character and his personality.

Medieval Bengali literature, or whatever at any rate was known of it when Tagore started his literary career, consists almost exclusively of long narrative poems of somewhat didactic nature, interspersed occasionally with songs: it centers round the popular cults of rural life on the one hand, and the short, sometimes sweet and poignant lyrics about the love exploits of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa of the *Vaiṣṇava* mythology or the homely charms and yearnings of Umā or Pārvatī or the mystic and esoteric draw of Tārā or Kālī of the *Śākta* mythology, on the other. Thematically and formally these poems are repetitive and mechanical, their versification monotonous, and their images and vocabulary conventional. But for the *Vaiṣṇava* lyrics of the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there was hardly anything in the whole range of our medieval literature that could feed and nourish a late nineteenth century Bengali mind that had already tasted Shakespeare and the English romantic poets along with Vālmīki and Kālidāsa, Madhusudan Dutt, Isvarchandra Vidyasagar and Bankimchandra Chattopadhyaya.

During the sixties of the last century, when Tagore was yet just a toddler, the medieval tradition was not dead altogether. Besides the *Vaiṣṇava* lyricists who had never lost their hold, Bhāratchandra, the poet of the small feudal court of Krishnanagar and perhaps the last in the tradition of long religious narrative poems, and Rāmprasād, one of latest of the medieval mystic poets and composers in the *Śākta* tradition, were still being assiduously read and cultivated. Then, there were Isvarchandra Gupta, whose short satirical and narrative poems

Bankimchandra was so fond of, and the popular rhymsters like Dasarathi Ray and Ramnidhi Gupta, popularly known as Nidhu Babu, who had also written satirical, humorous and mythological poetry. Despite certain modern elements in Isvarchandra Gupta, as regards mainly theme and attitude these poems were all, by and large, medieval in outlook, theme, form and technique.

But with the advent of Rammohan Roy our literature started emerging from the medieval to the modern. Rammohan was no creative writer, nor were the Christian missionaries with whom he came to cross swords. But between them they created the Bengali prose as a medium of precise and logical expression for the most subtle and abstruse speculative thought and argument. It was still artificially tied to the apron strings of Sanskrit in diction and syntax and in general tone. But almost simultaneously another variety of Bengali prose made its appearance, a prose for narrating stories; adapted to very much secular theme, it was perhaps somewhat coarse and vulgar in taste, but it contained at the same time much of the flesh and colour and spirit of the colloquial speech of Calcutta of that time, the qualities of Calcutta cockney, if one could coin such a term. Once rationalism and secularism had got hold of the Bengali spirit, it did not take long for literary Bengali prose to take shape and form, and become the vehicle of creative vision, thought and imagination. From Mrityunjay Tarkalankar to Devendranath Tagore and Isvarchandra Vidyasagar, and from the latter to Bankimchandra Chattopadhyaya, it is the story of a language growing organically, from stage to stage, in the hands of writers consciously directing the process of growth. It was the prose of his father, of Isvarchandra and, more significantly, of Bankimchandra that Tagore took over for the exercise of his early writings in prose: his early travel diaries, his sketches and essays, and his novels. And it was not merely in the exercise of his prose style, but also in the choice of his theme in the historical novels, in his art forms, and in his craft that he followed them at the beginning.

But not so in poetry. I have already hinted that the medieval tradition of Bengali poetry, if not already dead, was all but dead; at any rate it had become inert and ineffective. The spirit of the third, fourth and fifth decades of the nineteenth century

was against it, and it had no longer that creative strength and fervour to enable it to ignore that spirit. Indeed, when Madhusudan Dutt entered the stage, whatever still remained of the tradition was just blown to dust. With his knowledge of the Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, English, French and Italian languages, and his understanding of our own and Graeco-Roman and Christian myths and legends, and with the training and tradition of the Derozian Young Bengal radicals, he effected, almost overnight, the transition of Bengali poetry from the medieval to the modern. True, he took his themes from our Epics and *Purāṇas*, indeed much of his writings were in the old epic mould and tradition, but he breathed into them a new spirit altogether, the spirit of the age in which he was born. For one thing, he broke the shackles of the traditional and monotonous medieval Bengali prosody and imparted to it a new vigour, rhythm and movement, by introducing the Miltonic blank verse; he also introduced for the first time the Petrarchan form and structure in the Bengali sonnet. For another, he gave new meaning and interpretation to worn-out themes, so that what was old became new in a new garb and spirit. Indeed, he became the father of a new school of poetry, to which came to belong poets like Hemchandra Bandyopadhyay, Nabinchandra Sen and Rangalal Bandyopadhyay, to name only a few of the more well-known.

When Madhusudan died, Rabindranath was a mere boy, but the Madhusudan cult was very much alive. Yet it is somewhat strange that he does not seem to have been much impressed by the epic and heroic grandeur of the creative imagination and expression of that great liberator of Bengali poetic tradition from the medieval bondage. Rather his juvenile mind pronounced itself very strongly against Madhusudan's great work, the *Meghnādvadh Kāvya*, though, later in life, he retracted all that he had said and corrected himself, and took the fullest advantage of all the new elements that Madhusudan had introduced into Bengali prosody.

But the fact remains that Tagore in his formative years was somewhat unresponsive to the medieval tradition, except to that part of it which is represented by the *Vaiṣṇava* lyricists; he was also unresponsive to the new heroic trend enunciated by Madhusudan. The explanation for this has to be sought, I



believe, in the literary environment of his family.

The poets I have already mentioned, including those of the medieval tradition, were read and admired in the Tagore household, but those who were loved and adored were the *Vaishnava* lyricists, such as Vidyāpati and Chāṇḍīdās, Jñānadās and Govindadās, the contemporary English romantic poets, and one contemporary Bengali poet, Biharilal Chakravarti. The last one, undoubtedly a minor poet who still clung, thematically, to the medieval tradition, had introduced two elements into Bengali poetry which were new: one, a romantic attitude towards nature, and two, a lyrical note which was neither objective nor conventional but purely personal. Here, then, were the poets who appealed to the adolescent mind of Tagore and these were the poets who were speaking out their personal joys and sorrows, desires and yearnings that they deeply felt and experienced; indeed their music was the music of their own soul. Tagore, entirely unaffected by the famous Bengali poets of the contemporary times, was fascinated by the *Vaishnava* lyricists, the English romantic poets and Biharilal, and instead of trying to handle mythological material in a new way, as did his forebears, he sought, even as he began his career as a writer, in his personal dreams and desires the theme and inspiration of his poetry. Among the contemporary Bengali poets Biharilal alone had any significance for him, and in later life Tagore used to consider Biharilal as his master. This was of course an understandable exaggeration, but the fact remains that many of his juvenile works contain imitations of that poet. But this again is anticipating things.

That Tagore drew himself away from the heroic and mythological tradition, and accepted the lyric as the medium of his creative expression was a historic decision, and significant in many ways. First, he came to respond almost instinctively, it seems, to the voice and demand of the new age, and by one stroke ushered in the modern age by drawing the curtain over the medieval in so far as Bengali poetry was concerned. Secondly, he came to find out, and again almost instinctively and perhaps somewhat inevitably, the correct, the most suitable medium of his creative expression. And thirdly, in his hands it became a fine tool to cultivate his personality with. The fact that in all he said, wrote and did, his lyricism, that is,

his personal reactions and responses at the depth of his being, and not his objective appraisal, was all-pervasive, indicates the nature of his personality.

Finally, let me turn to his immediate family background.

Tagore's was a rich, aristocratic family which stood aside from the main currents of Bengal's social life in the nineteenth century. It possessed a distinctive and individual tradition consisting of a curious mixture of many elements: an over-refined polish inherited from an urban and decadent Muslim culture; a strain of deep and brooding self-introspection emanating from a much older inheritance, that of the *Upanishads* and all that they connote; the influence of the best English writers of the time, and, through them, of Western life and thought; and, the most significant of all, an ardent although unspoken nationalism, mainly Hindu in content and character. Altogether, it was an extraordinary spiritual atmosphere in which Tagore passed the most impressionable years of his life. The social aloofness of the family was completed by its exclusiveness in marriage relations owing to its being outside the orthodox Brahmanical pale, and also by his father's adherence to the movement for heterodox religious reforms inaugurated by Rammohan Roy.

Tagore himself was aware of this spiritual and social aloofness of his family. He writes to his wife in July 1901: 'We are totally different from other Bengalis in everything—in education and culture, in language, in temperament and habit.' The old generation with its tradition was passing out when Tagore was born, and the dawn of a new age was just visible. In wonderful language the poet himself tells us of the remote and somewhat isolated world in which he spent his childhood.

The house where I was born was tranquil and secluded like the suburb of a big town. We were not disturbed by the noise and clamour of chattering neighbours. When I was born, our family had already cut loose its social moorings and floated away from the common harbour and the common Hindu tradition of numerous rituals and ceremonials, and the worship of gods and goddesses had left only faint traces in our house. Spears and swords, rusty and broken, hung on the walls of the hall. A temple was there, gardens inside and outside the house, and gloomy rooms where huge earthen vessels, containing the holy water of the Ganges,

reposed in safety. In the old days each season had its grand and noisy festivals, but the glory of this tradition was fading out when I was born and I cannot remember anything about it. We were on the threshold of a new age, but we could not see all its features yet. Besides, we were utterly unlike the other Bengali families and had our own peculiar spirit and tradition. We were poor, for my grandfather had managed to exhaust almost the whole of his vast wealth. Thus, we lived, remote and apart, like an island cut off from the mainland.<sup>2</sup>

And again:

Calcutta was not yet a city of cement and bricks and one could see the green earth here and there. Factories did not smudge the sky with their black smoke. The forest of dwellings was not so dense and there were ponds and tanks in the interspaces, whose water glistened in the sunlight. As evening approached, the shadow of the *awattha* tree grew longer and longer and the fretted leaves of the coconut tree quivered in the breeze. We had a tank in our south garden which was connected with the Ganges by means of a cemented canal, and it was lovely to see the water cascading into it like a fountain. Occasionally, we could hear the strange sounds made by the palanquin-bearers as they toiled and groaned their way along the lane, the equally strange sounds made by the coachmen as they drove along the main street. An oil lamp burned dimly in the evening and in the half darkness the old housemaid told me fairy tales. In the hushed world I lived in a corner apart—a shy and quiet child.<sup>3</sup>

That was what the poet was like in his childhood, a lonely outcast, as it were, in a lonely family. 'It was a lonely, outcast boy', thus the poet describes his childhood, 'whose only play-mate was his own soul and who never left his corner; an outlaw whom school and society could not control, on whom even the authority of the home sat lightly.' And it was in this environment that the poet's brooding, self-absorbed imagination was created and nurtured.

For the grown-up members, however, the family life was

<sup>2</sup>Free, summary rendering by the present author from original Bengali. Reply to Students' Address at the Septuagenary Celebrations.

<sup>3</sup>*Chhalehela* (My Boyhood Days, 1940, Visva-Bharati). Translated by Marjorie Sykes.



never dull. Jollities, musical soirees, amateur theatricals kept them engaged all the year round, but they were equally interested in serious things. Music, literature, poetry, nationalism (a variety of it so ardent that there were even secret associations in the family, where plans for the country's liberation were discussed), all these combined to build up a rich and many-sided culture which, in spite of its isolation, never become stagnant. A free joyousness reigned in the house, but there was no undignified or vulgar riotousness. The fourteenth child of his parents, the youngest Tagore was welcome everywhere, and he grew up quietly absorbing everything that was happening around him. The Tagore household was a very congenial home for the budding genius of the poet, since it was a centre of art and culture.

A systematic truant, the young Tagore was enchanted by this atmosphere created by poetry, music and painting. He was nowhere rebuffed and he imbibed all its subtle and gracious influences. Reference has been made again and again to his deep and diverse reading even at an early age and also to his translation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. He translated from Sanskrit also and scribbled verses, for which encouragement and appreciation were not lacking. He listened sensitively as his elders, Dwijendranath, Jyotirindranath, Satyendranath, Svarnakumari and others talked about literature, and learnt a good deal. He adored and aspired to imitate the lyrics of Biharilal, whom I have mentioned already. When he was alone, this dreamy and solitary adolescent wove all kinds of radiant phantasies about nature, about the misty, vague longings of his own heart. And it was thus that young Tagore started his career as a poet, and poetry with him, at that age, was his only escape and fulfilment.

In his motherless childhood he lived under the unlimited autocracy of servants, and starved for affection and tenderness. His loneliness continued in his adolescence. Deprived of all companionship that a boy naturally longs for at this period of life, he was thrown back on himself, and tried to find in a self-created 'unreal rootless world of phantasy' all the gratifications that the outside world denied him. In this state of auto-existence, 'mountains become molehills', imaginary joys and sorrows seem more real than real life, and one naturally indulges

in the kind of exuberance that Tagore condemned in later life.

As a boy he never went out much. The world outside reached him only by means of flitting glimpses through the window bars. Wind and rain, sun and sky, trees, birds, beasts and men, visited him sometimes across this barrier, but there could be no intimate companionship, as in the case of Wordsworth. 'Nature', recalled the poet later, 'tried to play with me in the language of signs. We were separated by the rods of the window: she was free but I was not, and so we could never come together. She seemed to be all the more lovely for that reason. Today there are no window-bars between us, but nature and I still talk across a barrier.'

And thus was born a poet, inward-looking and contemplative, quiet, somewhat withdrawn, lonely and reposeful, aristocratic in mind and bearing, and intensely personal in his reactions and responses, caring more for the inner life of man than for his material externals.

Tagore knew that he was born to be a poet, a writer. Even when his talents had not yet matured and had not been recognised by even those who read and wrote in his own language, he was fully confirmed in the knowledge that poetry was the only muse he was destined to serve; and when he was seventy he begged of his countrymen to regard and judge him as a poet and composer alone, and not in any other role. Yet, as it happened, he was destined to write not only an astonishing volume and variety of poems and songs but also an overwhelmingly large volume and variety of short stories, novels, and dramas, religious sermons, essays and addresses concerning literature, art, aesthetics, phonetics, prosody, sociology, history, politics, religion and a great many other subjects. He was equally destined to take active part in politics, in the national as well as international movements that were of fundamental significance to stir him to his depths; he was destined to enunciate new social and educational ideas and to work them out, to establish a unique school and, later, a very remarkable university and an experimental centre of village reconstruction. He was also destined to ask himself questions about God, Life and Death and to answer them, to evolve a Religion of Man. And this is not all. Much later in life, very much in his old age, he

also chose to be a painter and left some two thousand and five hundred drawings, sketches and paintings of some significance. All this, despite his frequent travels in his own country and in the four continents of the world, constantly exposing himself to contacts with the outside world. Even for an uncommonly active man, his activities in volume and variety were almost super-human, and his reserves of energy limitless.

It has been argued, and at times with some vehemence, that had Tagore been more steadfastly and loyally devoted to the muse of poetry, avoiding other distracting interests, had he a more unilinear personality, he would have been a greater poet. I do not know about this. In any case, such speculations are futile. This, however, I would point out that what greatness he achieved he achieved because of his multiple personality, because of his comprehensive interest in, and love of, life as a whole, because of his contributions in so many spheres.

Indeed, Tagore could not be anything else but what he came to be. Sociologically speaking, he was a product of history and of the social environment in which he found himself; his life, his art, indeed his whole career as a poet and writer, as a thinker and a man of action was very largely conditioned by the forces of contemporary life and society, in his own country and in the wide world outside. His reason, personal will and psyche only determined the form and character of this conditioning. Tagore's was a very sensitive mind, and his sensibilities were very sharp and keen even for a poet. Given the age he was destined to belong to, it was only natural for him, and in the logic of things, that he would react and respond actively and creatively—the latter because he was a poet—to all that was happening or not around him, and articulate his responses and reactions, sometimes and most often, in poems, songs and other forms of creative expression, and at other times, in criticisms and interpretations, speculative thought and direct action. Every single articulated idea, image and action is only a part of a bigger whole, and that bigger whole is his total personality, the personality of a poet, not in the narrow sense in which textbook critics understand the term today but in the Vedic and classical Indian sense which I shall explain at a later stage.

It was in this sense that Tagore wanted to be a poet, which

indeed he came to be. But he was also destined to be a great man as well, a man in whom great poetry, that is, great vision and imagination, thought and expression, are integral and inevitable constituents.



### 3. Influences

BESIDES the complex of contemporary life and thought in India, to which I will turn later on, there was a mass of other influences at work all through Tagore's life which played a part in shaping and forming his personality. The list of such influences would be long, for Tagore's sensibility and receptivity were exceptionally keen, even for a poet. He was very much alive and alert in a world that was fast becoming small owing to the phenomenal growth of communications and the spread of education. Starting with the *Upanishads*, he was influenced, in turn, by Buddhism of both the Lesser and the Greater Vehicles,<sup>1</sup> by classical Sanskrit literature including the Epics, by English literature and through English by other Western literatures and Western thought and culture, by the medieval culture of India as manifested in Sufism, in Kabīr, Nānak, Chaitanya, Dādu and the *Vaishṇava* poets of Bengal, and by the whole of Bengali literature from its beginning till his times. He put himself in touch with the submerged cultures of the rural folk also and tapped those sources of Indian culture—aboriginal and primitive—which lay hidden under the dominant culture of the minority. More than this. In periods of crisis, he came back, again and again, to these perennial sources of social and spiritual forces and drew from them fresh urge and inspiration. Indeed, if one is to mark out the dominant indigenous influences on Tagore, one must mention the *Upanishads*, the medieval poet-saints or saint-poets and the *Vaishṇava* poets on the one hand, and the submerged cultures of the rural-agricultural folk, of the *Sahajiyās*, the *Āuls*, the *Bāuls* and the like, on the other.

This leaves out of count all the contemporary movements in this country and elsewhere, the many travels he undertook throughout his life, in his own country and abroad, extending over four continents, and his contact with men and women, great and small. But what gave Tagore's genius a peculiar turn and richness, what was the earliest and what had perhaps the

<sup>1</sup> *Hīnayāna* and *Mahāyāna*.



profoundest influence on him was the *Upanishads* with their characteristic humanism that they preach.

## 2

At the time when Tagore was born, although there was conflict between the orthodox and the progressives, the general humanist orientation of the middle-class culture was dominant. The whole tradition of the Tagore family was humanistic, in which there was not the least taint of any intolerance and sectarianism. Aloof from the turmoil outside, and by reason of its being outside the pale of the orthodox Brahmin organisation,<sup>1</sup> it had developed a liberal and enlightened culture of its own. Dwarkanath Tagore, the poet's grand-father, was Rammohan's close associate, and *Maharshi* (the great seer) Devendranath, the poet's father, was his immediate disciple. Leader of the conservative section of the *Brāhma Samāj* and an uncompromising theist, Devendranath was too deeply steeped in the noble and beautiful ideals of the *Upanishads* to be a sectarian, and although this was an outlook too lofty for the average man, it was his personality which guided and moulded what we have called the culture of the Tagore family. The love of the *Upanishads* was an integral element in this culture, and Tagore imbibed it richly. Indeed he sought to clarify, enrich and deepen the humanist tendencies in the contemporary middle class by an appeal to the spiritual and humanistic glory of the ancient and classical India as underlined in the *Upanishads* as well as in the Buddhist *Dhammapada*, the *Jātakas*, *Avadānas* and *Gāthās*, in the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*, and in Kālidāsa's immortal poems and dramas.

It is, therefore, important to realise what to him the *Upanishads* stood for, how he reacted to their teachings and how they were related to Indian culture, both ancient and modern, and what spirituality they imparted to it. All these take us to

<sup>1</sup> The Tagores are *Pirāli* Brāhmaṇas. *Pir* in Persian means Islamic 'Saint' and *Pirāli* means *lit.* 'following the ways of life of Islamic devotion'. Socially, from the point of view of the Hindu caste organisation, the Tagores were looked down upon by orthodox Brāhmaṇas, for having eaten or co-mingled, it is alleged, with Musalmans in a bygone time.

an examination of the nature of Indian culture itself, about whose spiritual content, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan says in his *Indian Philosophy*:

Philosophy in India is essentially spiritual. It is the intense spirituality of India, and not any great political structure or social organization that it has developed, that has enabled it to resist the ravages of time and the accidents of history. It may have blundered. But it did what it felt able and called upon to do. The history of Indian thought illustrates the endless quest of the mind, ever old, ever new.

The paragraph quoted above shows the most striking quality of Indian philosophical speculations. Unlike Greek thought, it is not ratiocinative. Nor is it a rationalisation of subjective wishes. There is no lack of intellectual power in Indian philosophy; the different systems of Hindu, Jain and Buddhist thought, all logically and scientifically organised, are its positive proofs. But its primary concern is not an intellectual appraisal of the objective world but the expression of deep spiritual yearnings, the attempt to explore their real meaning. From the *Vedas* down to Śaṅkarāchārya and Rāmānuja, this is the main purpose of Indian philosophers. To this task they bring unparalleled gifts of intelligence and sensibility, and the progress which science attained in India shows that the Indian mind was as much at home in the world of spirit as of matter. Radhakrishnan points out further:

Indian philosophy has its interest in the haunts of men, and not in super-lunar solitudes. It takes its origin in life, and enters back into life after passing through the schools. The *Gītā* and the *Upanisads* are not far from popular belief. They are the great literature of the country and at the same time vehicles of the great systems of thought. The *Purāṇas* contain the truth dressed up in myths and stories. The hard task of interesting the multitude in metaphysics is achieved in India.

These are unique qualities in Indian philosophy. Great simplicity is here combined with great subtlety. It was not till many centuries later that a professional class of metaphysicians grew up, divorced from the life of the masses, with logic-chopping

and verbal hair-splitting as their main occupation. When Indian philosophy was alive, philosophy, poetry, art and social life were closely related. Religion and philosophy and actual living were united here in a way which has no parallel elsewhere. The *Upanishads* are great both as religious and as philosophic works, and they are at the same time a part of the day-to-day human experience. Today, Hinduism is replete with observances and superstitions, but as long as the Indian social system had vitality, it corrected such accretions spontaneously, produced movement after movement, absorbed impact after impact in a way that made ossification impossible. It was a rational synthesis that went on gathering within itself new conceptions of philosophy and new experiences of life. There was the free-st possible contact between the Indians and the foreigners, and they had a unique capacity of assimilating whatever was worth doing so from foreign countries. At the base was the rock-like solidity of the Indian village system, which combined great vitality with stability. This was at the root of the permanence, the simplicity, and the grace of Indian civilization, which united, in one social and spiritual bond, communities living as far apart as in the Punjab, in Bengal and in the South. Besides what it itself created, it absorbed elements from the pre-Aryan, the non-Aryan and the barbarian civilizations, from the Greeks, the Romans, the Egyptians, the Scythians and the Hunas, from the Mediterranean, Proto-Australoid, Tibeto-Burman, Polynesian and the Melanesian ethnic strains.

Although to describe the tradition of India the expression 'spiritual' is commonly used, 'humanistic' is perhaps a more suitable word. Therefore, this is the word I would use to describe the Indian spirit as we see it in the *Vedas*, in the *Upanishads*, in the *Gāthās* and *Avadānas* of the early Buddhists, in the *padas* of the *Sahajayānī* Buddhists, in the songs and aphorisms of the medieval Bengali *Vaishṇava Sahajiyā* poets like Chāṇḍidās, for example, and, of course, in Rabindranath Tagore. The Vedic hymns celebrate the glory of the gods and of men who worship them, and their beautiful spiritual ardour is framed in the love and worship of the human emotions. The Upanishadic aphorisms are addressed to the universal man. Reading them one feels as if they embody the collective soul of all mankind, exploring the simplest and the deepest problems of all time:



life and death, whose mystery and awe will never be subdued, the invisible world's relation with the visible, truth and justice and duty. There is an extraordinary clarity in the *Upanishads*, as well as in the lyrics of the medieval mystics, and we marvel today at the greatness of soul that could pierce through all illusions and arrive at the basic truths with firm conviction. In a sense, they represent the supreme achievement of the human spirit, not merely of intellect, let it be repeated, but of spirit, precisely that because of which man is human.

With unflinching courage the sages tear off veil after veil of illusion; there is no groping, for there is the irradiating light of knowledge; and finally they arrive at the universal self, as in the dialogue between Prajāpati and Indra: *Asato mā sadgama-maya, tamaso mā jyotirgamaya, mṛtyor mā amṛitamgamaya* (Lead me from the unreal to the real, from darkness to light, from death to immortality). This is the prayer and message of the *Upanishads*, the prayer of the universal human soul. Attempts to render the message of the *Upanishads* in purely intellectual terms have generally failed, as have the researches of commentators, ancient, medieval, and modern, to fix the precise connotation of such basic Upanishadic terms as *Brahman*, *Ātman*, etc. That the authors recognised a hierarchy of consciousness is clear, and Prajāpati's elucidation of it to Indra in the *Bṛhadāranyaka Upanishad* is based on a kind of primitive psychology. The last and the highest state is that of *turiya* or ecstasy, a state which produces *ānandam*, the highest possible state of mental happiness; but commentators differ as to the precise meaning of these terms and as to the steps that connect the *turiya* with the lower states. But, as far as it is possible to gather a system at all from the Upanishadic aphorisms, it does not differ very much from Kant's, although, inevitably, the terminology is different.

Contrary to the usual belief, there is no denial or disparagement of sensuous life, nor is there any undue emphasis on sorrow or on the futility of life. As Barth says in his *Religions of India*, 'The *Upanishads* are much more instinct with the spirit of speculative daring than the sense of suffering and weariness', and Cave points out that 'within the limits of the *Upanishads* there are, indeed, few explicit references to the misery of the life caught in the ceaseless cycle of death and birth. And its

authors are saved from pessimism by the joy they feel at the message of redemption they proclaim.' But there is more. The *Upanishads* are derived directly from the *Vedas*. The pagan, spontaneous joy in life that we find in the latter is somewhat subdued; there is an element of contemplation, of an awareness of deep problems which makes self-surrender to simple joy impossible. But the *ānandam* or the ecstatic joy, which is said to be the highest experience, does not preclude detached enjoyment of life to the fullest degree.

*Brahmā, Ātman, Īvara*—these are related terms in the *Upanishads*, and their exact connotations are nowhere clear. It is here that commentators have differed most radically. Investigation of the differences would call for a philosophical treatise. Here it is enough to say that the final position of the *Upanishads*, as understood and interpreted by Tagore, identifies Man with God in a way no other theology does. The Upanishadic God-in-Man expresses an ideal different from that of Christianity, which places God above human level, and then throws an unbridgeable gulf between them in the shape of original sin committed by man. Redemption and man's reunion with God are rooted in this separation, without which Christianity would not exist. The *Upanishads*, on the other hand, make Man and God of the same essence: 'I am He'. Man becomes the measure of all things; instead of being a frail instrument, liable to decay and corruption, man in the *Upanishads* is infinitely potent, a vessel of inexhaustible possibilities, and that is exactly why man is considered essentially a spiritual being.

The above is not a philosophical estimate of the *Upanishads* but an unvarnished statement of how the poet Tagore would and did look upon their teachings. He would not feel any interest in the ontology and psychology of the *Upanishads*, or in the problems of their textual interpretation. But the attitude of the sages to life and death, the way they formulate some of the deepest yearnings of the human soul, the disciplined solace which they reach after their strivings, the sublime and luminous poetry in which they express themselves—these would have very great impression on a poet's sensibility. A poet who had been brought up in the tradition of such poetry and such teachings would not be likely to lay it aside. To say that Tagore was steeped in the *Upanishads* hardly gives any idea of what these ancient Sanskrit



texts meant to him. One can say that he lived and breathed them, and in the last phase of his poetry he speaks in their very language and accent.

In his sermons and religious discourses, even in his socio-political and literary essays, he turns to them again and again, quoting, analysing, paraphrasing and re-interpreting them in the light of his personal experiences. This he does throughout his life, as though the vision and the experience of those ancient seers were his own. With them he seems to share a common life of direct and immediate vision and a common perception of some of the most basic truths of human existence.

An analysis of the Upanishadic passages he quotes and makes use of shows that he prefers those in which the human spirit bursts forth into joyous exaltation, an exaltation born of immediate perception of truths uttered in transparent clarity of vision and with the dignified strength of conviction. Some of the noblest and grandest of his poems are similar bursts of exaltation born of singular spiritual experience, reminiscent of the *Upanishads*. Indeed, the general atmosphere of the *Upanishads* permeates all his major creative works and determines, to a very large extent, the character of his being, though it must be remembered that the interpretations he gives to the Upanishadic passages he quotes again and again are entirely his own and do not follow those of any of the well-known schools.

One of the poet's most important contributions to contemporary culture was his restoration of the Upanishadic tradition and making it a dominant element in the evolution of our cultural ideology. Here perhaps it would be interesting to notice the contrast between Bankimchandra and Rabindranath in their approach to India's past and with regard to the sources from which they derived their inspiration. Both built a genuinely national ideology which, while borrowing much from abroad, had, as its core, a re-discovery of the national history and tradition. Bankimchandra re-discovered those elements which, as subsequent history has shown, emphasised certain loud, colourful and aggressive ambitions, and which, as the social milieu changed, transformed themselves into an increasingly sectarian programme. Tagore, on the other hand, re-discovered still more ancient tendencies, tendencies which were inward and con-

templative, which emphasised man's oneness and his intrinsic sacredness, which, far from countenancing the least sectarianism, expressly repudiated it. Needless to say, much of this philosophy was impractical and could have any vitality only in early, simple and isolated communities. But when history itself tore away this idealistic, contemplative shell, the substance within was found to be fully in agreement with the most progressive aspirations of the complex civilisation of today.

It is important to remember in this connection that, while Bankimchandra and, later, men like Tilak and Aurobindo, Gandhi and Rajagopalachari, the Bengali and Marathi revolutionaries, to name only a few, went to the *Gītā* for their ideological sustenance and emotional and intellectual inspiration, Tagore sought out the *Upanishads* for his. And there is an essential difference between the two, not so much in the doctrines or in the ethics and metaphysics as in the general atmosphere. The *Gītā* is undoubtedly one of the basic books of Indian life and thought, a most potent and vital source of power, knowledge and wisdom; yet, at the same time, it breathes an atmosphere of the relentless and aggressive destiny of the soul, indifferent to any wail of the human spirit, even to death. The *Gītā* is essentially intellectual, radical and uncompromising; its systematised logic is cold and incisive. These tendencies of the ancient Indian tradition appealed to the incisive, ratiocinative mind of Bankim. The *Upanishads*, however, do not build up a cold system to be intellectually understood; they create an atmosphere of simplicity and serenity, they foster a detached enjoyment of life, an inward contemplativeness that offers disciplined solace. These are the tendencies that appealed to the keen human sensibilities of Tagore. I cannot help pointing out in this connection that Tagore's voluminous writings do not contain more than half-a-dozen references to the *Gītā*.

Both Bankimchandra and Rabindranath, in their attempts to re-discover India, turned to the pages of history; it was a natural process through which our growing awareness of nationhood had to pass to help us stand on values that were our own. In this instance, too, the difference between the two would be obvious when it is found that Bankimchandra chose fragments of past history (on the whole, from the so-called Muslim period), fragments that reflected clashes and conflicts and the play of

forces aggressively arrayed against one another, heroism and chivalry in battlefield, and the relentless pursuit of aims with all the motivation of religion. Tagore, too, in his *Kathā* (Ballads, 1900), the poems of which were written largely when the first national uprising known as the *Swadeshi* movement stirred the enthusiasm of the people (1905-1910), chose and interpreted fragments from almost the same period of our past, from the history of the Rajputs, the Marathas and the Sikhs and their struggle for freedom and faith. But it is important to note that, far from bringing to the fore the aggressive, narrow, sectarian and chauvinistic aspects of the conflict, he brought out the nobler and the more undying qualities of the human spirit that shone bright even in suffering and death, that is, the basic humanity in man. Indeed, he seems to have delighted in portraying characters that had learnt to suffer and die nobly without any hatred or malice even for the enemy. Events and episodes that underline basic human values find colourful yet dignified portrayal in this series of verse-narratives. The same is true also of those verses that concern themselves with stories from the Buddhist *Gāthās*, *Avadānas*, as also of a large number of poems in *Naivedya* (Offerings, 1901). Even at the height of political passion, Tagore never forgot to pray, and his one prayer for his own country and his own people was for freedom, freedom not in a mere political sense, but in a much deeper and more real sense, freedom from ignorance and superstition, from poverty and squalor, from emotional and spiritual degradation, from narrowness and bigotry, from the bondage of national and religious boundaries. Indeed, the prayers of *Naivedya* are informed by a deep social consciousness; at the same time they ring with the high and noble spiritual note of the *Upanishads* which is just another word for humanism of a most natural, liberal sort. Here is one such prayer (c. 1900), one of the noblest though not so well-known:

This is my prayer to Thee, my Lord—  
 strike, strike at the root of penury in my heart.  
 Give me the strength lightly to bear my joys and sorrows.  
 Give me the strength to make my love fruitful in service.  
 Give me the strength never to disown the poor or  
 bend my knees before insolent might.



Give me the strength to raise my mind high above  
daily trifles.  
And give me the strength to surrender my strength  
to Thy will with love.

And, here is another, composed more than fifteen years later  
and entitled 'India's Prayer' (1917) :

Thou hast given us to live,  
Let us uphold this honour with all our strength and will;  
For thy glory rests upon the glory that we are.  
Therefore in thy name we oppose the power that would  
plant its banner upon our soul.  
Let us know that thy light grows dim in the heart that  
bears its insult of bondage,  
That the life, when it becomes feeble, timidly yields  
thy throne to untruth,  
For weakness is the traitor who betrays our soul.  
Let this be our prayer to thee—  
Give us power to resist pleasure where it enslaves us,  
To lift our sorrow up to thee as the summer holds  
its midday sun.  
Make us strong that our worship may flower in love,  
and bear fruit in work.  
Make us strong that we may not insult the weak and  
the fallen,  
That we may hold our love high where all things around  
us are wooing the dust.  
They fight and kill for self-love, giving it thy name,  
They fight for hunger that thrives on brothers' flesh,  
They fight against thine anger and die.  
But let us stand firm and suffer with strength  
for the True, for the Good, for the Eternal in man,  
for thy Kingdom which is in the union of hearts,  
for the Freedom which is of the Soul.

Indeed, Tagore's nationalism was surcharged with a very  
deep humanistic spirit and content, and he had a firm faith in  
the cross-fertilisation of human cultures, a theme which he  
elaborates in essay after essay and in many of his imaginative  
writings. *Gītāñjali* (Song-offerings, 1910), which happens to  
record a very significant stage of his deep spiritual strivings,  
contains two fairly long poems: in one he surveys the whole



range of Indian history and looks upon India as the meeting ground of many peoples and cultures including the culture of the contemporary West; in another he administers a severe warning to his own people for their active and passive support of caste which denies to man his basic human right and status as man, for their putting up with conditions of life that crush the lowliest and the lost. In his famous essay, *Bhāratvarsher Itihāser Dhārā* (Current of Indian History, 1912), he tries to show that the synthesis of cultures is the main theme of Indian history.

## 3

Besides the Upanishadic tradition, which was all-pervasive, Tagore chose to imbibe what he considered to be the essence of Buddhism. The character and personality of the Buddha, his deep humanism, his rationality, his emphasis on personal morals, his ideal of resisting evil by goodness, anger by patience and non-anger, violence by non-violence, and, above all, his concern for all living beings came to have a great fascination for Tagore. The Mahayanist emphasis on the last and on the ideology that there was no personal salvation so long as all sentient beings were not salvaged from the cycle of the suffering from decay and death, seemed to him to have underlined the essential sacredness of life, and no sensitive soul, far less a poet, could help being impressed by it. Early in life he was attracted by the Buddhist *Dhammapada*, a book of Prākṛt verse. The *Dhammapada*, enshrining as it does the noblest human truths of Buddhism, is as much ennobling and edifying as any great poetry of fine cadence and music is, and the poet translated it into Bengali. And later, when he had attained maturity, he rendered into Bengali verse-narratives, and still later, into dance-dramas, a number of anecdotes from the Buddhist *Gāthās* and *Avadānas*. Indeed, his deep interest in the Buddha and Buddhism continued to feed and nourish him till the last years of his life, by constant supply of ideas and visions, words and images, but, most of all, by revealing to him attitudes and approaches to the contemporary problems of life. Here, too, he was not so much interested in the metaphysics or psychology of Buddhism, as in

its moral and humanist content and spirit.

Equally did he allow himself to be influenced and moulded by classical Sanskrit literature as represented by the two epics, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, especially the latter, and by Kālidāsa's immortal works, especially the *Śakuntalā*, the *Kumārasambhavam* and the *Meghadūtam*. These works, he thought, epitomised the variety and richness of India's classical civilisation, its senses and sensibilities, its spiritual yearnings, its system of human values. Again and again, in poems and essays, he harks back to them, recreates and re-interprets the world enshrined in them and explains the system of values set forth in them, all the time making them a part of his being and becoming. But, most of all, he allows himself to be influenced by the attitude and approach of Vālmiki and Kālidāsa towards nature, by their images and imageries as concretised in evocative words and phrases and by their reactions and responses to human problems and social situations. There are innumerable poems and songs of his mature and later years, which ring with the rhythm and accent and music of Vālmiki and Kālidāsa, and are saturated with their idioms and images, are impregnated with their ideas and visions. Tagore's attitude towards trees and plants and creepers, their flowers and foliage, indeed much of his attitude and approach to nature, his total conception and image of Śiva and Mahākāla in their various manifestations, of the *tapovana* and its life, of *bhoga* and *vairāgya*, of space and time, etc., are all deeply toned and tinged by classical Sanskrit literature.

## 4

The humanistic and secular ideal of Tagore, derived from the *Upanishads*, from Buddhism and classical Sanskrit literature, was, if anything, fortified by the influence of the medieval religious and spiritual tradition rooted in the minds of our common people. Indeed, Tagore was among the first to discover the existence of this medieval tradition and its continuity with the ancient tradition. Its ritualistic and theological content was derived from various sources, from Upanishadic Brāhmanism, from the pre- and un-Aryan tribal religions, from the vestiges of

the foreign religions that entered India with the ancient invaders and were later absorbed in Hinduism, and also from Islam. Its prophets came from amongst the Hindus, the Buddhists and the Muslims, and they preached creeds whose central message was equality of all mankind before God, the evils of division and dogma, universal love and brotherhood, and freedom from the rigidity and elaboration of religious rites and rituals.

Tagore himself says somewhere:

India has a spirit and tradition of her own, which have survived through all political upheavals. This spirit and this tradition do not obey the mandates of the holy books, and are little influenced by scholars. In fact, neither has been incorporated in any theological or social code, and their roots are deep in the heart of hearts of the masses themselves; from the first they have set themselves against restrictions and dogmas, and their prophets came from the commonest of the common people.

He says, and historically speaking nothing can be more true, that India's real vitality lies in the vitality of this folk tradition and spirit.

The difference between the ancient and the medieval tradition is due to a number of factors, factors contributed by the works of the Muslim Sufi saints on the one hand, and, on the other, by the influence of the long submerged mystic and heterodox cults of later Buddhism and also of the no less submerged folk-tradition and culture. These Muslim Sufi saints, while not abandoning their own faith, enriched the religion of the masses of India with new aspirations. The medieval religious spirit as we find it in India, from Sind and the Punjab to Bengal, was largely a contribution of this long line of Sufi mystics on the one hand, and the inheritors of Buddhist and Tāntrik mysticism on the other, such as the *Sahajiyās*, the *Āuls* and the *Bāuls*.

There was the famous Sufi mystic, Makhdum Syed Ali al-Hudjwiri, who settled in Lahore after a lifetime of pilgrimages. His tomb has become a shrine, at which both Hindus and Muslims pay homage even today. In his book, *Kashf al-Mahjub*, Makhdum says that the essence of religion lies in service to God and Man, and that to see oneself as one really is is the crown of religious endeavour. To see into one's own self, to be able



to merge oneself in the larger self, Sufis call this state *fana*; this is the goal of religious life, the *samādhi* of the *Vaishnavas*. The self is not lost in *fana* but merged in a higher self, and thus made fuller. Mukhdum is no isolated figure but is followed by a host of others, Nizāmuddīn Auliya, for instance, none of whom left a body of dogmas or are known to recorded history, but whose memory is still cherished by those who have enjoyed their teachings.

Greatest among these medieval figures are Kabīr in the west and Chaitanya in the east. These two are the most illustrious. Others, such as Dādū, Ravidās, Rajjab, Mīrābāi, to name only a few, whose names survive among the masses, with various mythical accretions, would make up a long list. Kabīr lived in the 14th-15th century, was born of Muslim parents, and was the disciple of the great South Indian prophet, Rāmānanda. By his simple teaching Kabīr attracted a multitude of followers, and Kahirism soon became the creed of a sect. But he himself was the greatest opponent of sects, and even refused to call himself either Hindu or Muslim. In his sermons he emphasised the need for labour, denounced begging and hoarding, superstitions and caste restrictions. In the simple language of the people Kabīr carried his message from village to village, visited all the shrines, Hindu and Muslim, and incessantly preached that God was not confined to any single religious denomination, that He lived in everything and in every creature, that the important thing was to be rid of vanity and selfishness, and to be filled with the love of God and of one's fellowmen, that God dwelt inside us and could not be revealed by holy books.

Chaitanya was another figure whose memory is a force even today. Chaitanya also denounced dogmatism and division, and preached a message of unity and brotherhood. That he made no distinction between Hindus and Muslims is proved by the fact that even today there are Muslim *Vaishnavas* in remote villages of Bengal. After his death Chaitanya became the hero of a cult, Vaishnavism ossified into a sect, and gradually the official inheritors of the Chaitanya tradition allowed it to decay. Before this, however, Vaishnavism produced a minor renaissance in Bengal, Orissa and Assam. *Vaishnava* music, poetry, and plastic art are Bengal's most original contributions to medieval Indian culture. As the home of the late medieval Vaishnavism



Navadvīp in Bengal become the cultural metropolis of north-eastern India.

The medieval tradition was, however, forgotten or, rather, it was a long time before the Bengali middle classes discovered its existence among the masses. The Tagore family was probably one of the first to study the *Vaiṣṇava* poets intensively: Chāṇḍīdās, the greatest of them, Vidyāpati, Jñānadās and others. Tagore was also a serious student of Kabīr and translated into English a large number of his songs. There are poems in Tagore's works that sound like an adaptation and interpretation of the songs of some of the medieval mystics like Kabīr and Dādū. Indeed, it is interesting to study the significance of the medieval tradition in Tagore's development.

Sufism, Kabirism, Vaiṣṇavism, all spring from common village people and express, with beautiful simplicity, the deep and traditional humanity of India's rural and agricultural civilisation. The *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, the songs of Kabīr and Dādū, the hymns of Mīrābāī, the Hindi and Bengali *Rāmāyaṇas* of Tulsīdās and Kṛtibās, the sayings of Chaitanya, the lyrics of Chāṇḍīdās, Jñānadās and Govindadās, to mention only a few, constitute a continuous and homogeneous tradition, the tradition of the Indians living in villages, pursuing the same occupations through hundreds of generations. From one aspect, this civilisation was inert, but from another, until the British conquest shattered its material base, it had strength enough to scotch false or dangerous tendencies. Speaking on *Vaiṣṇava* lyric poetry, early in life, Tagore asserts that these exquisite songs of the *Vaiṣṇava* poets do not relate just to Kṛishṇa and Rādhā, or God and Heaven; they are but the deepest yearnings of man and woman in love, of the deepest joys and sorrows of this earthy world of ours.

Rooted among the common, labouring masses, whose manner of life is based on constant inter-dependence, this tradition is humanist and universal, simple and profound. It is this which makes India a vast nation composed of diverse national and cultural components, each with its own special features but, together, they make up a great whole which, through thousands of years of recorded history, has expanded and become extremely rich and diverse.

Of this tradition Tagore was the discoverer and spokesman,

although it was many years before the poet could articulate it in modern terms.

We can easily see that this tradition is inherently universal. From the tribal and communal to national awareness, and thence to the awareness of the oneness of all humanity—the transitions are unforced and require only a slight change of material background. This is why Indian thinkers find it easy and natural to arrive at the ideal of the universal unity of man. In expressing the highest awareness of his nation, Tagore came to express the most advanced awareness of all humanity.

This he could do because, even when after the *Swadeśī* movement he had cut himself off from all direct political actions, Tagore never lost contact with the life of the Indian masses. He deeply loved Bengal's villages and their people, and knew them with an intimacy which increased with the years. During a most creative period, one of the longest, he lived among them, knew the bitter poverty and degradation they suffered, and also the eternal aspirations enshrined in their poetry, ritual, and art.

## 5

The ideals of the Upanishadic, Buddhistic and the medieval Indian humanism in Tagore were enriched by his absorption of the best that was in European culture which he received through his study of English literature, and, through English, of European literature and culture.

In the Tagore family, English literature was cultivated with enthusiasm, and early in life Tagore came in contact with the poetry of Shelley and Keats and later of Wordsworth, Swinburne and Browning. He even translated *Macbeth* when he was fourteen. His reading was as voracious as it was diverse, and by the time he was fifteen he knew almost everything of the published Bengali literature, and was becoming proficient in Sanskrit. Later, but early in youth, he studied a good deal of English, assimilating a fairly large part of the Romantic poetry in that literature, and a fair amount of Darwin and Spencer and other nineteenth-century English thinkers.

It is not possible to say what Tagore derived from English

poets and thinkers. There is a good deal of Shelley and Keats in his adolescent poetry, and we cannot doubt that the note of vague but ardent humanism, which is to be found in his early essays, novels and poems, is taken largely from Shelley, a few of whose poems he translated into Bengali. Traces of Keats can perhaps be discerned in the rich sensuousness of his early poems. He was also a great admirer of Irish melodies, some of which he adopted for his own music. It is symptomatic that neither Wordsworth nor Byron had much influence on him, though, sometimes, he is nearer to the former in the dignity and nobility that a large number of his poems in *Naivedya* breathe. He also shows Wordsworthian placidity, but all these must be rightly explained as born of parallel outlook and temperament on the poet's part rather than due to adaptation. In his socio-political essays and criticisms one can hear echoes of Spencerian individualism and his non-state social outlook, and of Darwinian evolutionary principles.

In fact, it would be vain to look for specific instances of imitation of any English poets or thinkers, except in a few ideas, images and attitudes. But we know that Tagore was an assiduous reader of English poetry and its study undoubtedly gave him new themes and new modes of expression. But his main models were Sanskrit and Bengali, and what he assimilated from English poets was incorporated in them. There is at least one poem which shows the dual influence of Kālidāsa and Swinburne. The famous poem *Ūrvaśī* reads in some places almost like a translation of one of the choruses in *Atlanta in Calydon*, though that impression loses its force before the more direct echoes from our epics and the lyrics of Kālidāsa.

In the last fifteen or twenty years of his life, Tagore went back to the study of English poets. This time the results were more perceptible. Whitman's influence largely explains his adoption of free verse and prose-poems, as they were called, but again he invested Whitman's crude directness and violence with the subtle and delicate cadences which we find only in Sanskrit poetry. Free verse in Tagore's hands became an instrument of magnificent power and variety, as in *Punaścha* (Post-script, 1932), *Patraput* (Plate of Leaves, 1936) and *Śyāmālī* (1936). The second of these volumes, especially, displays a power of original synthesis which is unrivalled. The Sanskritised voca-



bulary, accents of Bengali spoken speech, themes and images derived from the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads* and classical Sanskrit poetry on the one hand and those derived from modern European poetry on the other, and a variety of other elements are welded together with a skill which Tagore seldom surpasses. Free verse he gave up after some time, and in his last six or seven volumes he discovered a new mode which reached a Yeats-like barrenness and force in the very last volume. It is not generally known that the poet was closely familiar with some of the modern English poets, especially T. S. Eliot, whose *Journey of the Magi* he translated in *Punatscha*. Naturally, he could feel no sympathy with the sectarianism and the cultivated naivete of these poets, nor with their view that civilisation could be preserved only through the efforts of a cultivated minority. They represented, he thought, the last stage in the disintegration of the middle-class culture, while he, in common with Rolland and Gorki, had the vision of a new culture which would be created. True, he remained indifferent to the Eliot *Weltanschauung*, but he adopted, nevertheless, technical innovations from modern English poets.

It would be wrong, however, to attribute too much importance to this borrowing, for what the poet took from others he always made his own and one need not doubt that he would have made the new experiments in verse even if he had never come across the poetry of Eliot.

But apart from verse-making and sharpening of creative sensibilities, Tagore was also largely influenced by contemporary Western thought, e.g. rationality of outlook, socio-political ideas, notion of experiment (but not the allied notion of measurement), and the overall liberal humanist approach to life. These are great and significant influences which Tagore is never tired of acknowledging with evident gratefulness, yet, at the same time, they must not be over-emphasised. His rationality and notion of experiment were also as much the product of certain non-conformist traditions in Indian religion and philosophy, the protestant tradition of Rammohan Roy and of the prevailing spirit of the times as of contemporary Western thought; his liberal humanist approach to life was equally the product of Upanishadic and medieval Indian humanism and the essential humanism of the simple rural-agricultural folk of India as of



the humanism of the nineteenth century positivists, of the liberals and romanticists, and of personalities like Rolland and Gorki at a later stage. Indeed, of Tagore it is correct to say that he absorbed many influences and traditions, indigenous and foreign, and integrated them in his personality and achievements.

On the whole, then, although Tagore continues the tradition of international contacts, in thought, in expression and in feeling, he effects a much closer integration with the indigenous tradition than his forbears. The integration is so close that we cannot, as we can in the case of many of his immediate predecessors and contemporaries, lay our fingers on any specific element or aspect of his work and say that he borrowed it from abroad. Darwin, Spencer, Bergson, modern socialist thought and world literary currents have influenced him. But these are all international movements, and no sensitive writer anywhere has escaped being influenced by them, reflecting them either directly or indirectly in his works. Tagore, the doyen of a culture which was rapidly taking its place as part of the world cultural structure, shared in these movements and adapted them to the tradition he inherited. Foreign influences on Tagore go no further or deeper than this. The primary afflatus always came from the material conditions and spiritual inheritance of his country, and to the end his contact with these expanded and deepened.

Tagore's part in the rediscovery of our old heritage still awaits proper recognition. It should be remembered that when folk poetry was despised or unknown, he made valuable researches into it, and blazed the track for future field workers. He was the first to make a scientific as well as a creative study of the *Vaishnava* poetry and to show that its inspiration had enough vitality to be expressed afresh and in new modes. He absorbed influences, many and various, indigenous and foreign, and blossomed into a poet and a creative artist whose significance spread beyond the borders of his own country and the limits of his own time.

#### 4. A Legislator of the World

TAGORE'S thought, as I have already pointed out, has an organic structure. The basic tenets with which he started—faith in man as an embodiment of the spirit; a limitless love of the human kind; faith in love, peace, unity and harmony as social values; opposition to all forms of aggression, narrowness and chauvinism; belief in decentralisation—never changed; rather they expanded in the context of world history which gathered immense impetus during the eighty years of his life. History never outstripped him; his resilience enabled him to keep pace with its march and to forecast its destination as we will see as we proceed with this study.

In his early phase, the poet held up to the modern world a romantic idealisation of India's past. Right down to the British conquest, Indian civilisation was based on a relatively self-sufficient village economy which was inert almost for milleniums. British conquest destroyed this base, and what followed was not an organic adaptation of our civilisation to the altered social and economic conditions but an enforced urbanisation, abominably squalid, bereft of all moral and social values. This wrecked the Indian village life. Communal agriculture was destroyed by a new class of semi-feudal parasites, and handicrafts ruined by dumping machine-made goods from abroad.

Even as early as 1883, when Tagore was barely twenty-two, he was acutely conscious of, and indignant at, this condition of squalor and stagnation, wretchedness and poverty. He was already then criticising the futile and barren efforts of his countrymen to improve their social, political and cultural conditions. From this time onwards till 1905, when Curzon decided to divide Bengal into two parts, his socio-political writings and other activities show that he felt himself deeply concerned with the political happenings in India and abroad. It is important to understand in what way he felt himself concerned with such affairs. During these years we find him participating in the political controversies of the day and writing on, among other subjects, the ideals of Hinduism and Hindu marriage, on various

social problems, including labour problems and problems of co-operative movement, on contemporary political questions, relating chiefly to his own country *vis-a-vis* the British colonial rule and its reactionary role. We also find him in this period attending sessions of the Indian National Congress and animating it with his songs, presiding over the Bengal Provincial (political) Conference, protesting against the insolence of British imperialism in South Africa as manifested in the Boer War, and composing a significant sonnet on the theme. Then, again, it is during this period that he moves about in the villages of Eastern Bengal and Orissa in connection with the management of the Tagore estates, and thus comes to know at first hand the real socio-economic conditions of the Bengali and Oriya peasants. This was also the period when, inspired by the *tapavana* ideal as conceived in the *Upanishads*, he established his *Brahmacharyāśrama* at Santiniketan, and propounded his idea of the *Svadeśi Samāj* (National Society) which stressed the need of creative and constructive nationalism and formulated a scheme for a total reorganisation of Indian society.

Reading through his writings of the period and analysing the activities he was engaged in, it is clear that he was initiating himself into the newly found cult of Indian nationalism, which, at that stage of our culture, was very much Hindu in tone and character. Indeed, in his *āśrama*-ideals at Santiniketan and in much of what he then said about our nationalism, he was constantly harking back to our Upanishadic and classical Indian image of hermitage-culture and to the ideals of our social and cultural institutions of the same age. In reality, he was posing before us a nostalgic idealisation of our past. But at the same time he was conscious, one must admit, of the negative and purely agitational or mendicantory aspects of most of our social and political work of the time, about which he was frankly very critical and against which, therefore, he posited, in his *Svadeśi Samāj*, a creative and constructive programme of social reconstruction.

But then Curzon chose to divide Bengal and the Bengali speaking population into two parts. This gave rise to a violent storm of protest which came to be known as the Anti-Partition movement. This was the first organised revolt of the Indian people against the British colonial imperialism. Tagore threw



himself heart and soul into this movement, and became at once its priest, prophet and minstrel. He believed that the goal of the movement was the ideal he himself had conceived—the ideal of an India freed not only from foreign rule and exploitation but also from the bondage of all moral and psychological evil; a society based not on coercion and covetousness but on harmony and peace, on generosity and sacrifice; a nation-state built on decentralised economy and politics; and all these fostering and upholding a life dedicated, consciously and actively, to human values which are decent and civilized.

The period from 1905 to 1910-11 was a stormy phase in the history of our struggle for freedom from foreign domination. The preparation for the movement had started a decade ago, and during these fifteen years (1895-1910) Bengal with the rest of India advanced in political consciousness more than she had done in the last hundred years. For the first time in the history of Asia there was a political uprising of the middle classes, and a strong desire among them not to return to the old social institutions of their country, which foreign rule was in any case destined to sweep away, but to reform them and build up new social organisations of their own choice and under their own control. This desire, naturally, was inarticulate, and found its early expression only in violent action and in hatred of everything foreign. But let us not anticipate things.

The *Swadeshi* and Anti-Partition movement (1905-1910) drew in Tagore as an active political fighter, for the first time and the last. He led mile-long processions, addressed mass meetings and moved thousands by his pregnant words and vibrating voice. He composed dozens of songs and sang them himself in his high-pitched melodious voice, and in tunes that stirred the souls of millions to their very depths. Pent up emotions in the secret recesses of thousands of hearts burst forth suddenly and found a vent, in full-throated ease, in the magic words and tunes of his songs. He initiated the *Rākhibandhan* (tying of friendship wristlets) ceremony, symbolising the undying unity of undivided Bengal; he took a leading part in the establishment of the National Council of Education and accepted the task of drawing up a comprehensive programme of work for the Council, which led to the formulation of his ideas about national education; and then he wrote a series of political articles, explaining his



views on, and expounding his ideas about, the new gospel of nationalism.

But, then, the movement was slowly taking a violent turn, the attitude of the common people was becoming increasingly aggressive; political resentment was being transformed into hatred of the British people and of everything alien or foreign; all positive, creative and constructive ideas and ideals of nationalism were being ignored or thrown into the background. On top of that, the entire movement was dissipating itself in agitational activities and party squabbles.

Thus, when the pitch of the movement was at its highest and the tempo quickest, Tagore, quietly but suddenly, withdrew himself from it completely, went into retirement in his *āśrama* at Santiniketan, and plunged himself, in his own way, into purely creative and constructive work. Indeed, from the very outset, his emphasis was on the creative and constructive side of our political endeavours. He was strongly against fostering any illusion of charity and benevolence on the part of the alien ruling authorities, as he was against begging of them for small or big mercies. He was all the time calling upon his people to realise the fundamental humanistic implications of nationalism and freedom, their significance in social and cultural fields. He held up moral and spiritual values, that is, basic human values, as standards for judging political modes, methods and techniques of behaviour, and stood for ideals that were higher and nobler than mere political freedom. He also emphasised the question of purity of means in achieving higher human ends; and all this not merely through his essays, addresses and songs, but in his poems as well. For *Kathā* (Ballads, 1900), *Kāhīnī* (Tales, 1900), and *Naivedya* (Offerings, 1901) may truly be regarded as supplements to the essays and songs of this period. The fourteeners in *Naivedya*, despite their religious and spiritual content, embody, in poetic ideas and images, those ideals with which he sought to imbue the *Svadeśī* movement and which he derived from his assimilation of the *Upanishads*, of Buddhism and of classical Sanskrit literature. Most of the fourteeners in *Chaitālī* (The Last Harvest, 1896), although written a few years earlier, are also of the same kind.

But withdrawing from active politics did not mean that he remained unconcerned with the political and national destiny

of his country and his people. On the contrary his mind and pen remained constantly engaged in thinking and writing on matters social, political, literary and educational, and he tried thereby to lead and guide his countrymen along the lines he considered creative and constructive.

Despite all these activities on the public plane, his inner life, in the meantime, flowed on seemingly undisturbed, or even, because of the turmoil that must have been going on inside all the time, his creative instincts got sharpened and quickened, and his inner life evolved in accordance with its laws of growth and development. Within a year of his withdrawal from the *Spadeśi* movement, he turned a new corner and started his first exercises in so-called symbolical dramas, in one of which he inculcated, for the first time it would seem, the idea of what, later, in Gandhi's hands came to be known as *satyāgraha*.

Also within the course of this year, he wrote and delivered a series of sermons at Santiniketan, expounding man's spiritual experiences as revealed in the *Upanishads*, and planned and started writing his epic novel, *Govā*, in which he expounded his national ideology, which was already being inseminated by a strong undercurrent of internationalism. In 1910, he started composing the songs of *Gītāñjali*, and the symbolical plays *Rājā* (*The King of the Dark Chamber*), and *Dākghar* (*The Post Office*, 1912). He also composed this year what later came to be adopted as our national song, *Janaganamana-adhināyaka Jaya hē*. Life was taking a new direction, looking more and more inward, its aesthetic and spiritual sensibilities getting more and more sharpened and quickened. The boundaries of his own country and his own people were getting dissolved into the contours of a wider world; his nationalism was merging into an international content, the world was opening its doors wide and beckoning him to enter there, which he did with joy and thankfulness, though not without a little trepidation. And then he sang:

Thou hast made me known to friends whom I knew not.  
Thou hast given me seats in homes not my own.  
Thou hast brought the distant near and made a  
brother of the stranger.

In 1912, he went to England and thence to the United States; his sojourn abroad saw the publication of the English *Gitanjali*,

followed by *The Gardener*, *The Crescent Moon* and *Chitra*, the last being the English version of the Bengali verse-drama, *Chitrāṅgadā*. Within a month of his return home in October, 1913, the announcement of the award of the Nobel prize was made.

During these years there was hardly any literary or cultural movement of any significance in Bengal, or for that matter anywhere else in India. Indeed so far as Bengal and Bengali literature were concerned, Tagore had himself monopolised the entire literary and cultural scene. But, in 1914, Pramatha Chaudhuri, husband of Tagore's beloved niece Indira, started a Bengali monthly, *Sabujpatra* (The Green Leaf), which became the organ of young contemporary Bengali intellectuals. They pleaded for the spoken Bengali as the medium of literary and creative expression, for a modern intellectual outlook in social, economic, political and cultural matters, and for a form and style of literary expression that was sharp and pointed, tense and precise, revealing an attitude that was more intellectual and objective than emotional and subjective. Tagore at once welcomed the movement, since it was in tune with his prevailing mood and ideology, identified himself with it by contributing to *Sabujpatra* poems, essays, short stories and novels, and thus signalled the beginning of a new chapter in his creative life and a new dimension of his personality.

In 1915, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, who had not yet been called *Mahatma*, along with his wife Kastura Bai and the staff and students of the Phoenix School of Transvaal, South Africa, visited Santiniketan and stayed there for some time. From then ensued a friendship between Gandhi and Tagore which deepened in the subsequent years, despite some sharp and acute differences of opinion and in the nature and character of the two personalities. Meanwhile, the First World War had broken out and Tagore saw in it the grimacing face of nationalism red in teeth and claw. He felt bitter and his mind turned, once for all, against all expressions of nationalism, chauvinism, racial hatred and narrow patriotism. So, when he went to Japan and the United States in 1916-17, his addresses on nationalism emphasised mainly its evil aspects.

Yet he did not cut himself off altogether from the political struggle for freedom that was going on in his own country. In 1917, he wrote his famous political address, *Karlār*



*Ichchhāy Karma* (As the Master Wills It), and the equally famous national song: *Deśa deśa nandita kari*; he protested strongly against the internment of Annie Besant for her political activities, as also against the ruthless repression practised by the then Government of Bengal; and he attended the opening session of the Indian National Congress and read the now famous 'India's Prayer', cited on page 47.

But the most significant was his direct and immediate reaction to the massacre of the innocents at the Jallianwallah Bagh at Amritsar, followed by the declaration of martial law and attendant atrocities perpetrated by the British ruling authorities. The details of his reactions have, in recent years, come to light. After the ghastly incident, nothing for days was known, no news trickled through, and when the first whispers reached our leaders, all voices, including those of Gandhi and Chittaranjan Das, were hushed into agonised silence. But Tagore could not rest until he spoke out in a historic letter to the then Viceroy of India, renouncing his knighthood in order to 'give voice to the protest of millions of my countrymen surprised into a dumb anguish of terror'. That letter remains and shall ever remain as a classic in the literature of our national liberation.

Yet, when Gandhi started his Non-co-operation movement as a protest against the Jallianwallah Bagh tragedy, Tagore did not join in it; he did not even have any sympathy with it, far less could he lend any support to it. He had come back from Europe and America, after being away for more than a year, on July 21, 1921, when Gandhiji's movement was at its height. While in Europe, he had already heard about it and felt very much disturbed by the ideas and implications of the movement, but now he experienced it face to face. The masses of India had risen and they were in no mood to listen to any word of caution. But against the whole force of the current of popular sentiment, against the opinion of his esteemed eldest brother, philosopher Dwijendranath, and against the entreaties of many of his colleagues at Santiniketan, Tagore objected, openly, to the movement. In the course of two successive addresses, he rejected, without mentioning Gandhi by name or criticising his leadership, the ideology of Non-co-operation as enunciated by Gandhi, by emphasising the imperative necessity of intellectual and moral co-operation between India and the West.



Tagore no doubt admired Gandhiji's emphasis on self-help, on our own creative and constructive efforts, on simplicity, charity and universal love, on non-hatred and non-violence, on resistance to, and Non-co-operation with, whatever was evil, on the general humanistic appeal of his message and on the infusion of ethical and spiritual values into politics. Indeed, in one of his early symbolical dramas, as I have already pointed out, and in a number of lyrics, he had already enunciated the idea of Passive Resistance (not, Non-co-operation, be it noted), and had anticipated many of Gandhi's other ideas. Tagore held Gandhi in the highest esteem, and he was, as we have seen, one of his earliest supporters in India. But he protested against certain negative aspects of the movement; he did not like and accept Gandhi's scant regard for science and western thought and culture, his boycott of western educational and cultural institutions, his comparative disregard for aesthetic and cultural refinements, his suspicion of modern political and economic theories and institutions, and his somewhat conservative and revivalist outlook on social and cultural matters, and this despite his onslaught on caste and untouchability and his concern for the lowliest and the lost.

I must not forget to mention that it was also at this time that Tagore was thinking of the transformation of the *Brahmacharyāśram* at Santiniketan into the *Viśva-Bhārati*, where the whole world could gather and form one nest (*yatra viśvam bhavatyekanidam*).

A difference in their outlook, in spite of their common elements that were deep and abiding, was quite apparent from the very beginning, and at a certain stage both indulged, however briefly, in polemics aimed at each other. But there was Charles Freer Andrews who knew and loved both and formed a bridge between the two. An arrangement was made for a heart to heart talk at Santiniketan and the three heads engaged themselves in an introspective exchange of ideas. Nobody knows what happened, what ideas were exchanged and what synthesis achieved, except what we are told by Leonard Elmhirst: that they agreed to differ from each other.<sup>3</sup> When, however, the

<sup>3</sup> Leonard Elmhirst's 'Personal Memories of Tagore' in *Rabindranath Tagore, 1861-1961, A Centenary Volume*, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 1961.

three emerged the world came to know that Gandhi described Tagore in his usual cryptic manner as the Great Sentinel, presumably of human, and hence of national, values.

The rest of the story is recent memory and I need not go into it.

It must not be supposed that Tagore had grown indifferent to the question of political freedom or to the enslavement of our people and to their suffering. It appears that with time his love for his countrymen increased as did his aversion to the system that kept them enslaved. Even a couple of months before his death, he wrote that remarkable essay *Sabhyatār Saṅkaṭ* (*Crisis in Civilisation*, 1914) in which he pronounced his final verdict on a civilization which was based on the enslavement of others and on the ruins of all decent human values.

Nevertheless, in the twenties and thirties, Tagore was no longer a mere fighter for the national liberation of India. During the years after he had withdrawn from the *Swadeśī* movement, his thoughts on our national culture and ideology developed in its own pattern, because it did not fully agree with the prevailing notions of our active fighters for freedom. But by 1930, when he visited the Soviet Union, his ideas reached a significant culmination. If he was frank and outspoken in his admiration for what Soviet Russia had achieved within a short time in the fields of education, health and sanitation, and in raising the standard of life and living of the ordinary people, he did not conceal his deep concern at the rigid regimentation that was inherent in the Soviet system, he showed his concern at the Communists' scant regard for the human mind and spirit and the sanctity of the human individual, at their monistic approach to all problems of life and culture. However, the impact of socialist thought in India in the late twenties and the thirties and the contemporary literary and cultural movements in his country and the world helped him to extend his social and cultural horizons and deepen his humanistic convictions. This explains his strong indictment of the Japanese, Italian and German versions of the Fascist ideology and action in China and Ethiopia, and, later, in Europe and many regions of Asia during the Second World War. They also explain partly the form and content of his creative writings and his social and aesthetic attitudes and approaches of this period.

By its own logic and compulsion, his thought had emerged from its idealistic shell, and there was then no barrier any more between his world and the actual world. He proceeded to formulate his *Religion of Man* (1930), which had been evolving in him in slow stages, and which, in purely Upanishadic terms, embodied the latest advance in world humanism. Once more there stood up a poet who could declare with all the conviction of personal experience: 'We can never go beyond man in all that we know and feel', despite all the intellectual triumphs of science in which he had considerable pride. It was a message of joy and an affirmation of universal life. From this time on he takes his place with the world's foremost figures in his striving for universal freedom and equality, and becomes the prophet of a new creation and a new gospel. He leads the conscience of humanity which was outraged by Fascist barbarities, he voices the world's demands for peace and freedom, and he becomes the priest of freedom for the whole humanity as he was once of the *Swadeśi* movement.

Since then we find him taking part in national and international movements with an authority no one could question. Starting at a time when the nation meant the Hindu middle class alone, he went beyond the limitations of this culture and kept full pace with the development of the whole nation. Towards the end of his life, he had a vision of all nations transformed into one. And this development took place smoothly, for the Indian culture with which Tagore completely associated himself, was inherently capable of this expansion in area and depth and significance. Before him our writers took this or that aspect of our history and culture and devoted themselves to building up a whole world out of the materials supplied by it. Tagore was the first to have a perspective as large as the whole of India history. Moreover, it was a perspective which continued to grow larger and larger.

Nationalism has two aspects, and the dynamism which carries the nation forward to conquer material and spiritual gains is due to their combined operation. One aspect is forward-looking, absorbing lessons from abroad. The other aspect looks backward, explores its past history, and is inspired with confidence in its future destiny by the awareness of its past greatness.

The man upon whom falls the task of formulating the national



ideology works out the synthesis of these two aspects by discovering a subject and a style which connect both the past and the present. And this is what Tagore did. The important point about this ideology was that it provided the emotional impetus by which the nation expanded, chose its path, and proceeded along it. Whether the new ideology is a true or a false one may be tested simply. Does it lead to the expansion of the nation by the addition of new classes and communities, and does it provide these with mental and spiritual nourishment in the same measure as the former ideologies did the previous generations? Does it lead to increasing association of the nation with other peoples, forge new bonds of unity and harmony, or does it isolate the nation, encourage aggression, false notions of superiority and of rights?

The ideology which Tagore created for the Indian nation was, judged by these criteria, a good and progressive one. Consciously or unconsciously, he laid new foundations for culture and upon them he built the structural synthesis, of which we have already spoken and without which the achievements of the past as well as the new forces from abroad would be isolated or ruined fragments. Rammohan, Isvarchandra, Bankimchandra and Vivekananda were the pioneers who prepared the soil on which it was left for Tagore to build the framework of the main ideology of contemporary India and the structure of national culture. The lines along which this nation would develop, the final linements of our culture were laid down by Tagore. The nation calls him *Gurudev*, the Master. This is no mere rhetorical or sentimental effusion. Nor is this only an expression of gratitude; it is the statement of a fact. He was, indeed, 'the Great Sentinel', as Gandhi described him, the sentinel of basic human and spiritual values that India had reared up through the centuries and of which he was the re-discoverer.

We are now perhaps in a position to itemise briefly the basic constituents of our national ideology as interpreted and formulated by Rabindranath.

1. The basic humanist content of the previous generations not only remained valid, but was deeply underlined; its meaning and connotation were deepened and widened, as it was enriched by the humanist values of Indian tradition and of contemporary Europe.



2. Cultural and ideological integration and synthesis were not only very much recognised but were put into active operation. On the one hand, rural and folk culture, tribal and primitive culture were integrated into and synthesised with the high and sophisticated cultures of previous and contemporary times, and, on the other, contacts with outside cultures activated and increased. Thus, emotionally and intellectually, our national ideology became more or less co-extensive with the entire population of India, and Indian thought came to take a big share in the organisation of the ideological content of the contemporary world.

3. Nationalism and freedom ceased to be mere political concepts. Their creative and cultural significance were widely realised and their meaning was raised to a spiritual level. Nationalism and internationalism thus came to be understood as complementary, and not conflicting, concepts, one fulfilling itself in the other.

4. Naturally, therefore, aggressiveness, race-hatred, application of force for solving national and international problems, sectarian and communal attitudes and approaches to social, political, and economic issues, class and caste hatreds and jealousies, in a word, anything that tended to separate man from man and rear up causes of friction and misunderstanding, were strongly disfavoured and disapproved.

5. Positively speaking, emphasis was laid on the sanctity of the human individual, on the immeasurability and essential spirituality of man. Belief in an ethical approach to politics followed naturally from this, and hence a certain emphasis not only on the nobility and purity of ends but also of the means employed for achieving the ends. Human qualities like love, charity, understanding and accommodation, truth and justice, etc., in dealings between man and man were, therefore, accepted as essential values.

The sense in which Tagore is a world figure should now be clear. He is a world figure because he grew to be the spokesman of a nation coming into its own in the world community of nations. And during his lifetime he grew to be the spokesman of mankind as well because his utterances had universal appeal.

Since 1920, India's economic, political, social and cultural movements have been generated chiefly by those forces that are

changing the destiny of the world. Ancient Indian philosophy, literature and science have become part of the world tradition and have contributed to new thought movements. The re-discovery of the *Upanishads*, of Buddhist ethics and philosophy, and of medieval mysticism has produced new ideas and is operating seminally in the sphere of the intellect. The great revolt of the Indian masses against foreign rule was a prelude to a revolt on a continental scale. World history for many years to come will depend on the outcome of the political and social revolution that is taking place in India before our very eyes. Today India occupies a pivotal position in world affairs.

In the nineteenth century, there was admiration for India, but today there is more than admiration. This country has proved that it does not belong to a museum of historical antiquities. Forces which were once supposed to have been long exhausted are as full of vitality today as ever before and are capable of effectively aligning themselves with movements of all kinds elsewhere. India is playing a prominent part in modern history which is a history of struggle on all fronts, and the intellectual and cultural front is no less important and crucial than the political and economic. That India is important in the intellectual world of today in any sense is due to a very considerable extent to Rabindranath Tagore. This is why he is a world figure.

He made his own work a part of the literature of universal liberation, and thereby he did a great service to the national culture. In his hands it has developed into maturity, has grown in strength and beauty, and has allied itself with the forces that are most likely to serve humanity's future.

To sum up: He began writing at a time when the culture of modern India was still inchoate. None could tell how the multifarious tendencies would be combined, not in an immobile pattern, but in a dynamic way, so as to produce an integration which would retain all the wealth of the past and absorb all the wealth that the future would bring. Tagore effected this integration, by fixing our native tradition and further adapted it to the conditions of the modern world, and so ensured its life.

Tagore effected this integration in two ways. First, by his intense love for the nation's past; secondly, by his equally intense love for his people. The first enabled him to discover the deep

currents of Indian social life, while the second to find out the new channels along which these currents must flow if they were not to end in a stagnant bog. Love for the past and love for his country and his people, these two set in motion his great gifts and determined the mode in which they worked.

Tagore never ceased to grow. To the end his intellect and sensibility retained their freshness and fecundity, and reacted creatively to new data of experience, knowledge and history. New themes, new expressions, and new problems occupied him till the year of his death, and there was no falling off either in abundance or brilliance. Whence did he derive such energy? From his roots in his nation and in the larger life in which his nation was coming to play an increasingly important role. I do not hesitate to repeat this point because it has not been sufficiently emphasised. Tagore thus accomplished the work that Rammohan Roy had started. But he did more than this.

We have already spoken of the fatal contradiction in which our middle-class culture was enmeshed from the very beginning. Not many writers, it is true, have travelled far enough to reach the edge of that abyss at either end, but Bankimchandra and Tilak, to some extent, were perhaps the two most important of the few who did, and the essence of a culture is to be discovered in the success or failure of its greatest geniuses.

No predecessor of Tagore could resolve the contradiction. Could Tagore himself? He did. Alone among his contemporaries he escaped what seemed to be inescapable, and yet the terms which he retained to the last do not differ essentially from his predecessors. There is the same love for India's civilization, the same faith in India's destiny. To be sure, Tagore has a clearer, a more explicit faith in Upanishadic and medieval humanism, but this alone cannot explain his dynamism and his ability to break through the contradiction which paralyses middle-class thought.

In the final analysis, Tagore's victory over the contradiction of middle-class culture was a triumph of personality. The process by which he arrived at the integration was purely personal. The conclusion was socially and historically valid, for his age and clime at any rate, but not necessarily the process by which Tagore reached it.

This was to a certain extent inevitable, because Tagore was



an artist, an artist in life above everything else, and the mental processes of an artist, especially in an individualist society, are bound to remain personal, subjective. All we have any right to claim is that the final results would be socially valid.

It is impossible, therefore, to give an intellectual formulation of the various stages of the process by which Upanishadic humanism was transformed by Tagore into a unique humanism, based on his conception of the creative unity of personality, with a humanism that accepts force as a necessary means to eradicate the evil in social and political systems, and yet force he was uncompromisingly averse to.

Shelley has said that poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world. Poets, that is, have such a grasp of human experience that they can lay down laws for human life. Poetry is not solitary dreaming, nor contemplation of subjective reactions to selected fragments of experience. Poetry to be real must stem from real living, from real intercourse with the complex and far-reaching issues of life. Experience is both its root and its theme. Only poetry of this kind can be legislation for humanity.

Tagore's poetry is of this kind.





PART TWO



## 5. Germination and Early Blossoms

1872-1888

IN ONE OF the earlier chapters I said that genius grows like a plant, slowly and organically. The poet in Tagore grew slowly, stage by stage, and not in a flash. His early attempts at self-expression were halting and immature, and they bear marks of imitation with regard to theme as well as to form; and they are adolescent in ideas and sentiments. They lack the authenticity of experience and the adequacy of conviction. Years of formal discipline and layers upon layers of experience would have to follow before he could articulate himself convincingly.

Yet these early attempts are significant and worth studying because they help us understand the logic and sequence of the poet's creative unfoldment, and thereby his personality. Later in life, when he was past sixty, he was unwilling to include in the collected edition or selection of his works all that he had written earlier than *Prabhāt-Saṅgīt* (Morning Song, 1883). Again and again, in later life, the poet proved himself to be his best critic and commentator, and his judgements on his own works were for the most part apt and correct. In this instance, too, his unerring instinct and sensibility told him that these early blossoms were better allowed to wither away and be forgotten, and one cannot but agree with him. But to a student of social or natural science each fact and object of primeval or primitive life are valuable, since it helps us understand better the total process. It would appear to be the same with the germinal facts of a creative life and personality. This would perhaps justify a brief reference to the early attempts of the poet at self-expression.

Already in his boyhood days Tagore had experienced certain aspects of life that seem to have moulded some of his later attitudes and approaches. He had a painfully circumscribed childhood spent under the tutelage of family servants. The child had, therefore, to fall back on his own resources to keep himself engaged or amused: he looked out all the while



longingly at the wide and mysterious world of men and nature beyond the restricted circle imposed by the servants, and found delight in the most common-place things and happenings. 'Looking back on childhood's days', recalls the poet when he was over fifty,<sup>1</sup> 'the thing that recurs most often is the mystery which used to fill both life and world. Something undreamt of was lurking everywhere, and the uppermost question every day was: When, oh! when would we come across it? It was as if nature held something in her closed hands and was smiling by asking us: "What do you think I have?" What was impossible for her to have was the thing we have no idea of.' This sense of wonder and mystery that for him pervaded the world of nature and men, this yearning for that mysterious world, this instinctive delight in the smallest and most common-place things experienced in childhood, became for him a life-long spiritual treasure. Later in life, this yearning was transmuted into an yearning of the self for the unknown and the beyond.

'Servocracy', a term by which he described his childhood's world dominated by servants, also initiated him in the love of folklore and nursery rhymes, and in the ease and idiom of the spoken Bengali. And this love stayed with him for the rest of his life. In his maturer years, he used to look back nostalgically to his boyhood days and tried to re-live the day when he listened, perhaps for the first time, to a nursery rhyme that gave him his first experience of the magic of poetry: 'the rain patters, the leaf quivers'. 'Whenever the joy of that day comes back to me, even now, I realise why rhyme is so needful in poetry. Because of it the words come to an end, and yet end not; the utterance is over, but not its ring; and the ear and the mind can go on and on with their game of tossing the rhyme to each other. Thus did the rain patter and the leaves quiver again and again, the livelong day in my consciousness.'<sup>2</sup> If folklore tickled and opened up his imaginative vision, nursery rhymes gave him the first taste of organised sound and its overpowering magic and mystery.

Once this magic had spread its charm on him, he started,

<sup>1</sup> *My Reminiscences*, Macmillan, London, 1917 (Translation of *Jhansmriti* by Surendranath Tagore), p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

as soon as he was eight, scribbling verse in the traditional fourteen-syllable mould of Bengali *payār*. The lotus of poetry blossomed in no time in this fourteen-syllable form and even the bees found a foothold on it! 'Like a young deer which butts here, there and everywhere with its newly sprouting horns, I made myself a nuisance with my budding poetry.'<sup>1</sup> Nuisance certainly from the perspective of maturer years, but at the time there was, for the author, much intoxication in this fascinating exercise and an innocent happiness in being able to show oneself off. Nothing, however, has survived of these exercises which the poet, later in life, compared to 'the blossoms of the first flowering of the mango tree in late winter, destined to wither away and be blown off.'

The atmosphere of the Tagore house throbbed with music. Every member of the family appears to have been a practitioner of either vocal or instrumental music: Indian classical and not so classical as *tappā*, Bengali folk, Bengali late medieval or contemporary devotional, and even European. It was indeed a most uninhibited musical atmosphere that pervaded the Tagore house, and the young prodigy learnt and imbibed, without inhibition and without any serious liking or distaste for anything in particular, whatever he liked and wanted. Jadu Bhattacha, a well-known name in contemporary Indian music in Bengal, happened to be one of his teachers. 'He made one big mistake,' said the poet in later life, 'in being determined to teach me music, and consequently no teaching took place. Nevertheless I did casually pick up from him a certain amount of stolen knowledge ... It was no one's fault but my own that nothing could keep me for long in the beaten track of learning. I strayed at will, filling my wallet with whatever gleanings of knowledge I chanced upon.'<sup>2</sup>

At about twelve, the boy went through his *upanayana* (investiture of the sacred thread), which by itself has no significance for our purpose, except that the sonorous and rhythmic chant of the *gāyatrī*, with its candence and intonation, touched, deeply and abidingly, the sensibility of the boy. It was hardly possible for so young a mind to understand the *gāyatrī*,

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>2</sup> *My Boyhood Days*, Visva-Bharati, 1940 (Translation of *Chholebelā* by Marjorie Sykes), p. 38.

nevertheless it gave him an opportunity to expand his realm of consciousness in an indefinable and intangible way.

But more important than this were his travels in the company of his father to Bolpur and from there to the western Himalayas, which gave him his first opportunity to come in contact with the contemplative inwardness of his saintly father on the one hand, and with the inexhaustible richness, expanse and immensity of nature on the other. And both left abiding marks on the young and impressionable mind.

Despite all his saintliness, the father was sufficiently worldly-wise never to forget his parental duties to his youngest son. He was a strict disciplinarian and saw to it that the young boy went through faithfully all the scores of his rigid routine. Among many other things, he read with his son selected pieces of Sanskrit, Bengali and English literature, gave him lessons in astronomy, literature and Sanskrit grammar, and made the boy sing for him devotional songs in Bengali, Hindi and Sanskrit. But what left the deepest and most abiding impression on the boy's sensibilities was the father's chanting, every morning, of the most pregnant verses of the *Upanishads*.

A rich spiritual atmosphere would be generated as the father intoned the verses in dignified rhythm, and the boy, sitting by, felt himself lost in it.

It was during the sojourn at Bolpur that the boy wrote *Prithvirāj-Parājay* (Defeat of Prithvirāj, 1872), which the poet later described as a ballad. It dealt with the well-known historical theme of the defeat of the Chauhan King Prithvirāj by one of the early Turkish invaders. The poem was never published, and there is no trace of the manuscript. It was composed in the narrative epic fashion of the time. 'In spite of the superabundance of its martial spirit it could not escape an early death,' was the brief and ironical comment of the poet in his maturer years.

Thus, the young plant was growing; it was feeling the warmth of the morning sun and the upward thrust of the sap. Reading and recitation of, among other things, the *Rāmāyana* of Vālmiki in the original Sanskrit, of Kālidāsa's *Śakuntalā* and Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (which he translated in Bengali verse) served only to sharpen the urge for self-expression. But for the Witches Scene nothing of the Bengali rendering of *Macbeth*



has survived, but that one scene is enough to show the extent of mastery he had already attained of the diction and idiom of the Bengali language and of the rhyme and rhythm of the Bengali verse form. But the adolescent composer's first writing to get into print (without the author's name) was a long poem, *Abhilāsh* (Yearning), which he wrote in 1873 when he was twelve. This was followed two years later by two other poems, '*Bhārat*', a patriotic poem recited (1875) at the *Hindu Melā*, and '*Prakṛitir Khed*' (Nature's Lament), read before a literary gathering not very long after. Warm and affectionate encouragement from his elders, especially from Jyotirindranath Tagore and his young wife, Kadambari Devi, the former's creative teaching of music and poetry and the latter's loving care and concern, and Dwijendranath Tagore's erudite experiments in Bengali metrics and prosody, fanned the slender flame of poetry and music that had already been kindled in the young heart.

## 2

He was thus 'launched into writing poetry', and between twelve and twenty he wrote an astonishing number of poems, lyrics, verse-romances, musical plays, prose-plays and ballads. Of all this proliferation, *Vālmīki-Pratibhā* (The Genius of Vālmīki, 1881), *Bhānusīṃha Ṭhākurer Padāvalī* (Lyrics of Bhānusīṃha Ṭhākur, 1884) and *Māyār Khelā* (The Play of Māyā, 1888) alone have survived critical judgement; all the rest have vanished from the public memory, although they can still be ferreted out for the antiquarian's delight.

The poet himself was ashamed of his juvenile efforts and often criticised them, rather too harshly. Nevertheless, he had also some affection for them. 'Whatever their literary value', he argues somewhat indulgently, 'these outpourings have a history and background' ... 'a solitary, outcast boy dreamed in a corner and wrote down his dreams' ... 'I began to write broken, stammering verses, abrupt like showers of comets, unruly and disjointed. If the boy who wrote them was lonely



he was unruly too, a fiery little rebel.<sup>11</sup>

Poor as poetry though these early writings are, yet they have merits of a sort, especially if one considers the state of Bengali poetry at the time. Despite Madhusudan Datta and Biharilal Chakravarti, to whom Tagore acknowledged his debt, Bengali poetry was still clinging to the medieval tradition with regard to ideas and themes, and partly also to form. By the time Tagore would be in his early twenties bringing forth his early blossoms, he would all but be bringing about a complete transformation of that tradition by the introduction of new ideas and images, new themes and feelings, new forms and techniques. Tagore's early articulations in poetry, drama and music, about which the poet was so disdainful in later life, have, therefore, an important historical significance. They are no doubt often unformed and coarse, but they hold in them the seeds of later fulfilment, the beginnings of later magnificence; they reveal his early struggles with feeling, language and technique; they show, although faintly, his preoccupation with the aim and purpose of life, his searchings for truth. Some of his recurrent and profound themes in later life appear, however immaturely, and hence unconvincingly, in these works of adolescence and early youth.

In *Vanaphul* (The Wild Flower, 1880), his first book of poems written in his fourteenth year, the theme is the bond between human life and nature, woven around the love of a young girl, Kamalā, a child of nature, for a young handsome poet, Nīrad, who happened to be a man of the world and without love. Running into as many as eight cantos in the traditional manner and in traditional but flowing *payār*, its form is undoubtedly traditional, but the theme is not. The story ends in tragedy, and the whole attitude is one of unformed idealism, but the gamut of feelings and emotions surveyed is intensely human, and the story is wholly imaginative and not borrowed from traditional myths and legends.

In his next book, *Kavikāhinī* (A Poet's Tale, 1878), a tragic romance written in blank verse but in a lyrical vein, there is the same immature treatment of a theme which became significant later on: man never cares for the love and beauty that

<sup>11</sup> These quotations are either from *My Reminiscences* or from *My Boyhood Days*.

lie near at hand and disdains them, dreaming all the while for glorious treasures, but when he has travelled far away in his search for the unattainable, he yearns for what he disdained, and then seeks refuge in universal love and life. Here is doubtless an imaginative projection of the young poet's own experience: his intellectual gropings in the secrets of nature on the one hand and his instinctive adolescent craving for human love and companionship on the other. And even more than that. Here is also the experience of the weariness of mind in the continuous dalliance with love and happiness, and then the frantic attempt to get out of it in search of something else. These are imaginative themes and human experiences that Tagore would exploit time and again in later life. Much of it is of course romantic, an attitude which he may have imbibed from his contemporary reading of the English romantic poets, especially Shelley and Keats.

What these early poems lack, however, is that integration of idea and form, that interpenetrating unity which are so much in evidence in his later poems. The ideas and feelings he is now speaking of remain external and they are sometimes exploited as catchwords. Even such a lovely line as 'human heart longs for human love' is not woven into the texture of personal form and feeling, because, as yet, he has just not got the experience. The poet's confession in later life is frank and clear: 'In this poem there is a good deal of highflown talk about universal love. Talk, and the more highflown the better, comes easily and facilely to the young poet who is yet unwakened to the truth in himself and has to rely on everything that others say. He is as yet too immature to practise simplicity and restraint. He cannot rely on what is intrinsically great and noble to make its own impression but he tries rather awkwardly to help it on its feet by means of high-falutin pomposity.'<sup>1</sup>

But his *Bhānusiṃha Ṭhākurer Padāvali*, written under the pseudonym of Bhānusiṃha Ṭhākur and conceived admittedly as a literary hoax on his unsuspecting readers, is altogether different from all that he wrote in his adolescence and early youth, and hence it has to be taken somewhat more seriously. These lyrics were written frankly in imitation of the medieval

<sup>1</sup> *Jīvanmṛiti*, 'Bhārati'. Free rendering by the present author.

*Vaishṇava* lyrics of such poet-saints or saint-poets as Vidyāpati and Chāṇḍidās, which are full of a magical melody and evoke exquisite beauty and colour. Singularly graceful in language, images and rhythm, they have also a sincerity and concentration of passion that could not but affect Tagore's young and sensitive soul. He steeped himself in these lyrics and absorbed all their delicate music even when he was only twelve. Their ecstatic lyricism, their appeal, at once human and mystical, and their enchanting melodies, too, must have been imprinted on his growing sensibilities.

No wonder that the poet wished to write like these *Vaishṇava* poets, and *Bhānuśiṃha Ṭhākurer Padāvalī* was the result. It is with an astonishing cleverness that he imitates their diction and idiom, and even scholars were deceived and took his *padāvalīs* for genuine medieval work. In latter life Tagore judged the book very severely. The poems, he says, should have deceived no one, for, although the *Vaishṇava* idiom was copied successfully, the sentiments and feelings of the poems were purely artificial. As the language of the *Vaishṇava* poets was literary and stylised, it was easy to imitate, but of course their passion, as sincere as it is deep, could not be copied by the young and clever poet.

The poet was, indeed, a little too severe. At that stage of our knowledge of *Vaishṇava* literature and philosophy, it was not surprising to be deceived by Tagore's *padāvalīs*, so flawless and minute was the imitation of the technique, versification, images and even of the conventional contents and vocabulary of the old poets. The love adventures of Kṛishṇa and Rādhā, Kṛishṇa's playful and cruel tricks on Rādhā, Rādhā's laments that she and her lover are not together, the trysts in the dark, the wet *Śrāvaṇ* (the rainy month in Bengal) nights pattering with rain, the river Yamunā and Kṛishṇa's flute-playing on its bank, the secret bowers where the lovers meet—nothing of all this, so mellifluously sung by the *Vaishṇava* poets, has been left out. There are some beautiful pictures, beautiful music as well, and some of the ballads have turned out so well that an older poet would not have been ashamed to claim them for his own.

Yet, these *padāvalīs* or lyrics are hardly anything but a *tour de force*. Externally, the poems are brilliant and faultless, but they have no inner life at all, because they have none of the



brooding and passionate sincerity, the deep religious and spiritual ardour of the genuine *Vaishṇava* poems. Like all his adolescent works these lyrics, too, belong to an 'unreal, rootless, fantastic world'. Moreover, it is doubtful if the poet had been able to enter the inner world of *Vaishṇava* poetry at all: he was too young, did not know himself and the world enough. To write real poetry was impossible until the poet had begun to achieve this awareness, until he had come out of the 'trackless forest of his own heart' into the large and sunlit world outside. Until then he could only grope blindly about in sterile self-obsession and say false things without knowing that they were false.

*Bhagna-Hriday* (The Broken Heart, 1881), written in the form of a drama of thirty-four scenes or cantos but actually a string of lyrics, follows the pattern of *Vanaphul* and *Kavikāhinī*, and like the latter has a young, handsome poet, plunged in his vague, unsure ego, as the hero of the piece. Muralā, a girl, is secretly in love with the poet, but he, knowing not what he is after, wanders away and thinks that he is in love with another girl, Mālinī, but the latter disappoints her. Heart-broken, he seems to realise that it is Muralā he has always loved. He, therefore, comes back to Muralā, alas too late, for he finds her on her death-bed. Mālinī also, in the meantime, breaks other hearts until she finds her own heart broken!

All this sounds puerile and absurd, particularly the pretentious philosophy put in the mouth of the victims that one who owns nothing has everything, that a friendless is nowhere a stranger, that a homeless has everywhere a home. He had long known the absurdity of these childish fancies when at thirty he wrote in a letter:

When I began to write the "Bhagna Hriday" I was eighteen—neither in my childhood nor in my youth. This borderland age is not illumined with the direct rays of truth; its reflection is seen here and there, and the rest is shadow. And like twilight shades its imaginings are long-drawn and vague, making the real world seem like a world of phantasy. The curious part of it is that not only was I eighteen, but everyone around me seemed to have been eighteen likewise; and we all flitted about in the same baseless, substanceless world of imagination, where even the most intense joys and sorrows seemed like the joys and sorrows of dreamland.



There being nothing real to weigh them against, the trivial did duty for the great.<sup>1</sup>

All things were airy indeed, 'dream-like, and in such a world molchills easily became magnified mountains.'

The same rootless and fantastic world is vaguely expressed in *Saiṣav-Saṅgīt* (Songs of Childhood, 1884), a collection of ballad-like lyrics, all full of vapourous sentiments, and they are of course all tragic.

But *Vālmiki-Pratibhā*, the young poet's first musical play, is altogether different in tone, temper and atmosphere. The theme is taken from the well-known legend about Vālmiki who is said to have been in his early life a robber-chief named Ratnākar. Once he was moved suddenly to intense pity and anguish at the sight of one of a pair of cranes grieving inconsolably over the body of his mate brought down by the arrow of a hunter, and as a result Ratnākar burst into a verse of exquisite cadence and beauty. Thus started the transmutation of the robber Ratnākar into the sage Vālmiki and the composition of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Young Tagore substituted the piteous wail of the mateless crane by the piteous cry of a young girl who had been caught by the comrades of the robber-chief and was being carried by them to be sacrificed to the goddess Kālī. The girl's cry melts the heart of the robber-chief, he rescues her from his followers whom he turns away, and wanders about in search of a better life until the goddess Sarasvatī appears before him and assures him that it was she who disguised herself as the young girl so that she could, by ringing the human chord that lay submerged in him, rouse his buried humanity. Then she gives him a boon: 'Your heart of stone was melted by the music of pity; this music in your voice will be the music of humanity and will melt a million hearts. Your voice will reach many lands and will be echoed by many a poet.'

There can hardly be any doubt that young Tagore in his dreamy state was crying for such a boon, seeking for such an assurance. How daring that was for a youth not yet twenty, and who had not yet found his feet in his vocation of composing poems and songs of any creative significance, to pray for this

<sup>1</sup> *My Reminiscences*, p. 179.

boon from the lips of his imaginary Sarasvatī! Yet how true and how prophetic they all turned out to be!

The theme of the play is trite, but the twist given to it by the poet brings into focus a thematic symbol that he would exploit, again and again, in later life: a girl caught in the grip of blind prejudice and superstition and serving as the agent or instrument for bringing out or awakening the essential humanity in man, the young girl, or sometimes a child, being the concretised symbol of abstract humanity. The art-form of the play, which has often been put up on the stage with tremendous success, and which was produced and directed for the first time by the poet himself and himself playing the role of Vālmiki, has also a significance that must not be overlooked. As a closet drama it is rather poor, and as the poet confesses, 'it is perfectly uncreatable for its want of metre. It should be heard [and seen] on the stage as it is sung and danced in tune.' The entire dialogue is in verse, and every line of the verse is sung; yet it was not meant to be a musical composition, and hence not an opera. The free rhymes of the verse and the exuberance of song and music have an irresistible fascination, an easy joyousness. This joyousness of spirit, generated by the exuberance of music, is the real inspiration of Tagore's early plays, which were all written in the musical atmosphere of the family house. He was 'never tired of singing night and day; music, flowing ceaselessly, shed a rainbow light' on his soul.

With Rabindranath poetry, drama and music were truly inseparable. This is a feature of medieval Indian tradition in literature which he had imbibed and which he lived to re-form and re-interpret. It is significant that three of his early books of poems were called books of songs: *Sandhyā-Saṅgīt* (Evening Songs, 1882), *Prabhāt-Saṅgīt* (Morning Songs, 1883), and *Sāiṣav-Saṅgīt* (Childhood Songs, 1884); another was called *Chhābi O Gaṇ* (Pictures and Songs, 1884), and his first book of songs, *Rabichchhāyā* (The Shadow of the Sun), was published as early as in 1885, when he was twenty-four. His early dramas are full of songs as are many of his later ones. In his years of fulfilment three of his books, *Gītāñjali* (Song-Offerings, 1910), *Gītīmālyā* (Garland of Songs, 1914) and *Gītālī* (Collection of Songs, 1914), were also collections of *gītas* or songs; not a few of his titles have the imprint of *rāgas* and *rāginīs* and of

musical instruments (*Puravī*, 1925; *Sānāī*, 1940, for instance). He composed more than two thousand songs, 'which have defied the canons of respectable orthodoxy',<sup>1</sup> set them to tune and sang them himself; this he did throughout his life, from early boyhood onwards. He just went on singing through life, and in the process he seems to have transformed the people that spoke his tongue into a new cultural entity. Those who knew him in personal life observed that he was never so happy as when he was composing his songs, setting them to tunes, humming them, singing them, teaching them, and rehearsing his musical plays with his young pupils at Santiniketan or in Calcutta. There was music in his blood and there is, no doubt, a deeper and subtler connection than is apparent at first sight between his musical compositions and his poetry and between his musical compositions and his plays.

This is due certainly to his early upbringing. The Tagore house at Jorasanko, as also the one at Pathuriaghata, was an active centre of musical culture and of the revivalist movement in our classical music. *Ustāds* or masters of this tradition congregated there, and in the Jorasanko house some of them were in regular employment for training the younger members of the family. Rabindranath does not appear to have taken kindly to the rigorous and meticulous training of the classical tradition; he had the same kind of attitude towards this training as he had towards the traditional schooling and learning of languages. European music was also popular in the family, and Jyotirindranath, one of his elder brothers, was its most enthusiastic exponent. He would make Rabindranath as a boy sing or extemporise words to fit the tune. The young apprentice thus developed a keen musical sense rather than what is called musical knowledge. He loved our classical music, but was somewhat impatient of its rigorous grammar and its countless unalterable technicalities, which, he felt, were cold, abstract, confining and even somewhat suffocating. His sharp musical sense, coupled with a disregard for technical accuracy of the classical tradition, gave him a sense of freedom that encouraged and helped experiments, and this experimental attitude, which

<sup>1</sup> *Tagore: A Study* by Dhurjati Prasad Mukherjee, Padma, Bombay, Second ed., 1944.



stayed with him till the end, took shape very early in life.

Already at sixteen he was, taking liberties with the classical tradition, composing his own melodies as well as his own words, and he found in this creation intense delight. Nowhere in his early compositions is this attitude so clearly demonstrated as in the songs of *Vālmiki-Pratibhā*, *Kālmṛigayā* (The Fateful Hunt, 1882), and *Māyār Khelā* (The Play of *Māyā*, 1888), where he un-formed and re-formed the melodies of our classical tradition and dissolved their cold abstraction into the shapes and forms of individual human emotions. In the songs of *Vālmiki-Pratibhā* he also made the daring innovation of setting Bengali words to the tunes of Irish melodies and of applying the Spencerian theory of emotion that gives tuneful inflexions to speech, that is, to the words of the musical play. Words were set also to certain set compositions of instrumental music of the *Sitār*. Very soon he would be discovering that the fixed *rāgas* and *rāginīs* of our classical music did not have enough range to satisfy his urges for creative expressions in music, and so he would be looking for new means of expressing and releasing his musical urges. The same thing would happen with regard to his poetry, where traditional ideas, themes and forms would appear to be so worn out and suffocating that he would look out and search for innovations to enable him to express himself, to find himself. Slowly but surely the same principle would operate regarding his plays, novels, short stories, socio-political essays and even his day-to-day activities. The creative delight he discovered in his early musical experiments would stay with him till the very end of his life. '*Vālmiki-Pratibhā* is a new experiment in harmonies, a drama in tune.' That was how the composer himself later described it.

For some time the poet was enthusiastically interested in this new experiment and the success of *Vālmiki-Pratibhā* must have encouraged him tremendously. Shortly after, he wrote another play, *Kālmṛigayā*, in which he repeated the experiment. Again, the content is thin and unoriginal. The story, taken from the *Rāmāyana*, tells how Daśaratha killed, unwittingly, the son of a blind hermit. Much of the play was later incorporated in *Vālmiki-Pratibhā*, which explains why it was not included in the collected editions of his works.

The joyous abandon in creative expression, so marked in



*Vālmiki-Pratibhā*, characterises also the creative process underlying the composition of the poems of *Sandhyā-Saṅgīt*. Here we notice the beginning of a pronounced personal accent in his expression. Casting off the shackles of domination of other poets, the poet confesses, he felt the joyous abandon in his mind. '... Writing one or two poems I felt immensely pleased ... I found they were mine, entirely mine ... So long I had written in order to please my friends and had therefore followed patterns and modes with which they happened to be familiar ... Now, however, so intoxicated was I with my new freedom, I let my metres and rhymes take what course and shape they pleased. When they began to take curious, fantastic shapes, I was not shocked at all ... I respected no convention, and this rebelliousness gave me a sense of power. And I felt that what I had been seeking so far afield was quite near, although I had never seen it before ... I woke up from a dream and found my fetters gone ... *Sandhyā-Saṅgīt* may be poor as poetry, but the joy, the reckless pleasure I felt as I wrote the poems, is neither poor nor worthless.'

Formally, therefore, the poems in *Sandhyā-Saṅgīt* are on a higher level than anything he had written before. There is an unmistakable directness and spontaneity of feeling and a speed and freedom in expression regulated by a free and joyous rhythm. But the sterile self-obsession that dominated his earlier works still continues; he is still unable to forge effective ties with life and society, with anything outside his self; he still gropes around as blindly and as futilely as before. There is still the 'same unreal, rootless, fantastic world', the same voluptuous delight in sorrow, the same morbidity of spirit. An oppressive melancholy pervades all the poems in this book. Even their titles are significant: 'Suicide of a Star', 'The Despair of Hope', 'Lamentation of Sorrow', 'Castaway', 'Unbearable Love', 'The Wail of Happiness'. In 'Evening' the poet says that he is suffering terrible anguish of soul. 'Come, Evening, come nearer and still nearer, for my lonely heart yearns to nestle in your bosom.' Similarly, in 'Despair of Hope' the poet asks Hope to sit in his heart and tell him that he will have to suffer longer and even more wretchedly, that 'the

\* *Jivansmṛiti*, 'Sandhyā-Saṅgīt'. Free rendering by the present author.

broken fragments of my heart, whose sufferings seemed to have come to an end, will revive and suffer once more.<sup>1</sup>

Let me cite a couple of stanzas from two poems in *Sandhyā-Saṅgīt*, where the young poet is at his best. In one, entitled 'Evening', he seeks to create an atmosphere of a dreamy, languorous music as of a lullaby.

Come, Evening, gently gently come!  
 Carrying on your arm your basket of dreams!  
     Humming your spells,  
 Weave your garland of dreams!  
     Crown my head with them!  
     Caress me with your loving hand!  
 The river, heavy with sleep, will sing in murmurs  
     A half-chant woven in sleep;  
 The cicadas will strike up their monotonous tune.<sup>2</sup>

In another, 'The Wail of Happiness', he weaves the light of the moon with its subtle and delicate sights and sounds.

Happiness sighs,  
 Shutting her drowsed eyes:  
 'Sweet is this moonlight, sweet ...  
 A flute plays, far ... far away ...  
 A burden of gentle sleep  
 Has touched Night's laughing lids.  
 Waves gently swell on the river;  
 Gently on the trees leaves quiver.'<sup>2</sup>

Is the poet in some morbid, perverse way enjoying this eloquent melancholy? Such an impression would not be wholly correct, however. His inarticulate desires and passions cause his sorrow because they are inarticulate, because their meaning and goal remain unknown to the poet. In this ignorance and in the melancholy which it is bound to cause, there is no luxury at all, the poet assures us. All this belongs to a definite phase of mental growth, we are told, and has thus an essential truth. The poet himself says in this connection:

<sup>1</sup> *Rabindranath Tagore: Poet and Dramatist* by Edward Thompson, Oxford University Press, Second revised edition, 1948. Thompson's translation, p. 40.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

We write poetry in order to express ourselves.... To utter the voiceless longings of the heart is no sin at all; rather the sin lies in suppressing them. There is a dualism in the human soul. One part lies unknown and submerged under the thoughts and emotions and events of external life. But it does not forego its claims on us, and in our moments of deepest awareness we are forced to recognise its existence, for it is a part of our deepest existence. When there is no harmony between this inner self and the outer world our consciousness is shattered, and we suffer a pain to which we cannot give any label. We cannot even describe this pain, for the language in which it wails is itself indistinct and does not consist of words whose meaning and syntax we know. It is only a voice, a note of sorrow, and the melancholy of the poems in *Sandhyā-Saṅgīt* is of this kind. It is rooted in the mysterious depths of the inner life.<sup>3</sup>

In the later poems in *Sandhyā-Saṅgīt*, the poet is sometimes dissatisfied with this melancholy; he struggles against its dominance, and when he succeeds in overthrowing it sometimes, his mind is tranquil. Then he listens joyfully to the song of birds, to the murmur of the river. But the next moment all this is again screened out by the dark deep shadows of evening, and the poet returns to his lonely suffering. He is indeed tired of melancholy, of the longings which will not tell him what is their goal, and dismisses them for a time: 'Leave me, O leave me, before you have utterly whelmed my heart and snatched me away from those I love. If this hill and this river are again taken away from me, if again I lose this cloud and wind and stream and forest, if again I have to wander wearily without a home and sorrow stings me with its fierce fangs, then never again shall I rebuild my shattered home, my shattered heart.' The poet knows and tells himself again and again that, unless he can wake up from this torpor of numbness and turn about and face the real world, 'the shadow of a vast, horrible darkness' will engulf him. This shadow has already 'blotted out your sky, your sun and moon, and stars and planets. It has even blotted out your own soul ...' The poet urges his soul to 'clutch at whatever you can', for the 'limitless stretches before you'. The resolution that he must assert his own powers against the dark and senseless forces, grows stronger. In 'Song of Fight'

<sup>3</sup> *Jīvanīmṛti*, 'Gāṅgātīr'. Free and summarised rendering by the present author.



he fights against despair and melancholy a tearing and convulsive battle to come out victorious at last. In another poem he cries out for the day when sunlight will at last enter his soul and light it up.

## 3

When that sunlight does enter, the poet's dark melancholy is suddenly swept away by an overwhelming, irresistible impulse of joy and discovery, and he breaks out: 'how has sunlight quickened my life this morning!' But a little while ago there was gloom all around. 'The shadow of his own body darkened the path before him . . . he saw a fearful enemy before him in whose mouth there was gathering darkness and in whose eyes there was burning malice, there was a serpent's guile and poison in his smile.' Slowly, however, the poet saw other shapes and heard other voices. And then the great light dawned. A brave new world called out to the poet: 'Come, come out of your dark cell.'

The poet has recorded for us how this happened: 'One day while I stood watching at early dawn the sun sending out its rays from behind the trees, I suddenly felt as if some ancient mist was in a moment lifted from my sight, and the morning light on the face of the world revealed an inner radiance of joy. The invisible screen of the commonplace was removed from all things and all men, and their ultimate significance was intensified in my mind.' For full four days, the whole world seemed irradiated with a glory beyond words, and it rocked and danced in joy. This light and joy circumfused his soul, and in its radiance he saw things he had never seen before. Even the porter as he walked along the street with his heavy load surprised him with the virile grace and beauty of his movements. Two young men walking arm in arm, laughing and talking, brought him the same vision of joy that eternally wells up from the world's deepest core and fills up with the never-ending love and laughter of life. A cow licking her calf, a mother suckling her

<sup>1</sup> *Jivansmṛiti*, 'Prabhāt-Saṅgī'. Free rendering by the present author.



child, two friends laughing together—every little thing seemed to be a source of infinite joy.

It is in the 'Awakening of the Mountain Stream', the second poem in *Prabhāt-Saṅgīt*, that the poet finally and completely shattered the shell of egoism that had cribbed and confined his soul so long. In a crash and tumult of song he breaks away from the past and the confined happiness, thus suddenly released, sweeps away all obstacles. Indeed, with this one poem begins a new direction in Tagore's poetry. No longer constricted by the barren, joyless egoism of the past, his soul exults in the vision of a world full of life and light and joy; more beautiful and mysterious worlds loom in the distance. Here is a couple of stanzas from the poem rendered into English by Edward Thompson.

The mountain trembles, the stones  
In vast screes clattering pour;  
The waters, swelling and foaming,  
In anger and tumult roar,  
In their mighty exultation  
They would rend the mountain asunder;  
Mad with the morning's rays,  
Through earth they would crash and thunder.

And I—I will pour of compassion a river;  
The prisons of stones I will break, will deliver;  
I will flood the earth, and, with rapture mad,  
Pour music glad,  
With dishevelled tresses, and gathering flowers,  
With rainbow wings widespread, through the hours  
I shall run and scatter my laughter bright  
In the dear sunlight.  
I shall run from peak to peak, and from hill  
To hill my leaping waters spill,  
Loudly shall laugh and with claps keep time  
To my own steps' chime.<sup>1</sup>

With *Prabhāt-Saṅgīt* the poet seems to come of age and enters the threshold of life. Naturally there is as yet a good deal of undisciplined extravagance in the poems in which he

<sup>1</sup> *Rabindranath Tagore: Poet and Dramatist*, p. 43.

celebrates this new-found joy and freedom. The impulse is so novel, so overwhelming that the poet can only surrender himself to it, but cannot yet make poetry out of it.

'Welcome Song' contains the first beginnings of this new impulse. Someone tells the poet: 'Do not let yourself wither away like this. Can you not hear that all are calling out to you, telling you to come out?' Then one day the fountain wakes up from its frozen dream and rushes out in tempestuous, unrestrained flood; the poet feels in himself the surge of measureless power and sings a stormy psalm to the new life that dawns. This consciousness of a new life, of a new power and purpose we shall find in many of the poems in *Prabhāt-Saṅgīt*. In some of them the poet reveals a deep interest in and an understanding of modern science, and in a long poem science and mythology combine to produce a wonderful effect. There is also a deepening of insight into the mystery and meaning of life, but what is of the utmost significance is that it is in *Prabhāt-Saṅgīt* that Tagore first discovers himself in his youthful stature, and discovers also the world in which he lives. Both egoistic obsession and imitation are now over, and there is an enriching interaction between the poet's soul and the external world; he does not parcel out the universe into fragments but sees it as a whole; and this consciousness of wholeness and integrity is the inner substance of these poems.

In 'Reunion', for example, he explores the integrity of his spiritual life. Memory is the bond between the past, the present and the future; having lost, he says, the original union with nature, he has long had to wander along wearily in the trackless forests of egoism; and this sterile pilgrimage comes to an end only when he rediscovers the original union. Here, then, is indeed the seed of thought that would one day, in the fullness of time, become one of the main props of the poet's total view of life. In another significant poem, 'Echo', the poet fancies that what he sees as beauty or feels as music in a given object is merely the echo of the rhythm that pulsates in the heart of the universe; this means that beauty or music does not lie in the subject itself but is cognised and experienced by the viewer or the listener who is at one with the rhythm of the universe, a favourite idea of the poet which eventually gave birth to his faith in creative unity and personality. In two

other poems, 'Endless Life' and 'Endless Death', he enunciates the idea that life is ever evolving and ever renewing itself and death is what helps life do so. This idea, too, would stay with him to the end of his life.

*Prabhāt-Saṅgīt* is thus the poet's first significant work of art, where great thoughts, in their seeds no doubt, are sought to be synthesised with deep emotions, bold visions and imagination, with fine music and metrical movement. Yet it falls short of first rate poetry; the complete integration of content and form was yet to come.

*Prabhāt-Saṅgīt* was followed by *Prakṛitir Pratiśodh* (Nature's Revenge, 1884), a drama partly in prose but mostly in blank verse, with but a few songs thrown in. Built on the conflict between beauty and truth, between life and spirit, between love and reason, the play has not been a stage success, though it has undoubted dramatic qualities, and has sometimes been characterised as his first important drama.<sup>1</sup>

The hero is a *sannyāsi* who retires into a cave and practises penance in order to rise above the distractions of the world and the flesh. He succeeds in his attempt and proclaims so in fiery words. One day he happens to pick up a castaway girl in the street, and, moved to pity by her helplessness, carries her home. The girl calls him father, and the *sannyāsi*, in spite of a fierce struggle with himself, cannot repress the tender affection and attachment that sprouts in his heart for the child. He tries to explain to her spiritual and intellectual mysteries, but the girl never listens to his sermons; she only nestles closer to him in love and trust. Thus, she calls him back to life and the world by the simple power of her love; he can no more go back to his lonely and dark cell, screened off from light and joy and beauty. He has to surrender at last: alone, his powers are too frail to carry him across the ocean of life, he must join the company of the millions sailing together. Why should he scorn the common sun and moon, and vainly try to light up the dark path with the help of a tiny glow worm? The earth wears a new face after this surrender and his world resounds with joy.

The conflict of ideals, this sweet defeat and surrender after

<sup>1</sup> *Rabindranath Tagore: Poet and Dramatist*, p. 46. *Nature's Revenge* is available in English rendering as 'Sannyasi of the Ascetic' in *Sacrifice and other Plays*, Macmillan, 1917.



a protracted and bitter struggle, makes *Prakṛitir Pratiśodh* a better drama than the earlier one. It imparts dynamism to the whole action, a breathing vitality to all the words and events and situations. Written after his first great spiritual experience and the poems of *Prabhāt-Saṅgīt*, the poet's attitude to life and nature, love and human relations is easily understandable. The *sannyāsi* denied life and love and nature; nature took its revenge, life and love asserted themselves, and this eventually enabled him to discover the joy and meaning of life. Artistically *Prakṛitir Pratiśodh* may not have great appeal today, but its intellectual and spiritual content, in the context of the time when it was written and in helping us to understand the poet's personality, has certainly much significance. Here is a serious quest and a clear statement of the poet's faith. But let us listen to what the poet has to say: 'Great things exist in small, the infinite in the finite, freedom in love. When love opens our eyes, the barriers of the finite everywhere vanish.... The infinite may elude our vision in external nature, where it is cribbed and confined in self-made laws and is hidden in them. But when we see beauty or when we are in love, then, indeed, we are in contact with the infinite and the eternal even in the smallest motion of the heart, and no logic avails against such immediate and intense realisation. It is along this path of the human heart that nature conveyed the *sannyāsi* to the court of the infinite who sits on the throne of the finite and rules this world of finite beings and objects. In the drama there are two spheres. In the one, there are the ordinary men and women of the world, loving and living among their self-created trivialities, unconscious of their origin and roots in the infinite; in the other, we have the *sannyāsi* trying to obliterate himself and everything else in a self-created infinite. The two spheres are bridged by love, and then, when the hermit and the house-holder meet, the finite sheds its triviality and the infinite its emptiness. Love makes the finite and the infinite one.'<sup>1</sup>

In *Chhābi O Gān* (Pictures and Songs, 1884), his next book of poems, his familiarity with the newly found consciousness of universal life deepens and takes an easy intimacy. The poems are pictures in words. He began to compose them at Karwar,

<sup>1</sup> *Jivansmṛiti*, 'Prakṛitir Pratiśodh'. Free rendering by the present author.



near Bombay, and finished them in Calcutta where he was at that time living in a garden house on the Lower Circular Road, near Chowringhee. To the south this house overlooked a congested area inhabited by common people; and the poet was fascinated, as he tells us in *My Reminiscences*, by the spectacle of men and women going about, working, resting, playing. It all seemed to him like a story. Everything, however trivial, glowed with strange tints, enchanted him with its novelty, and there was no end to the pictures his fancy painted out of such homely material. 'Just as music deepens and enriches the most trifling syllable, so in *Chhabi O Gān* ordinary objects and occasions and happenings are transmuted into something rich and strange by an imagination which invests everything with its own hues.'<sup>1</sup> Each poem is a beautiful word picture, but each is also a piece of beautiful music, welling up from his soul in spontaneous joy. The poet, when he is twenty-nine, writes to a young friend: 'I was like a drunken man when I wrote *Chhabi O Gān*. Youth surged like a flood in my body and mind, and all I felt was a thrill of beauty and nothing else. Even today the old intoxication returns when I read *Chhabi O Gān*. None of my old writings move me so much.'<sup>2</sup> Many, many years after, a few years before his death, the poet commented on *Chhabi O Gān* in words that may be rendered as follows: 'I wrote it when my adolescence was passing into youth. Although the language is childish, the sentiments are more mature. Before, I had only been conscious of an indefinite, undirected pain which tried to relieve itself in delirious talk. Now my desires were no longer content with this vagueness and indefiniteness, and demanded shape and body. But although I wanted to paint reality and thus come into warm contact with it, my hand was not yet skillful enough, and I was bewildered by the strange mixtures of light and shadow which I saw in the world.'<sup>3</sup> So the poet still sat at the window, only a spectator of the drama of life, not yet an actor. He sees shadows in the distance, and makes them his own by giving them a body in his imagination. Some of the pictures are, therefore, real in a way, while the others are quite imaginary. But the poet has

<sup>1</sup> *Jivansmriti*, 'Chhabi O Gān'. Free rendering by the present author.

<sup>2</sup> *Sabujpatra*, 1324, Śrāvaṇ. Free rendering from original Bengali.

<sup>3</sup> 'Sāchanā', *Chhabi O Gān*. Translation by the present author.

not yet learned to talk clearly, and this makes the sentiments seem formed. He, however, tries to overcome this artificiality and to be natural and spontaneous. 'Thus comes about the intrusion of spoken language, with its wild and unbalanced steps, for the first time in my poetry', says the poet. *Chhabi O Gān* may, indeed, be said to be the preface to *Kaḍi O Komal* (Sharps and Flats, 1886).

But it is not all pictures and songs in *Chhabi O Gān*. There is a note of seriousness in a few of the poems, for example, in 'Love of Rāhu', which is undoubtedly the most outstanding poem in the book, remarkable for its strength and intensity, its imaginative sweep and swift rhythm. Rāhu, the bodiless planet, symbolises in this poem the passionate, all-devouring, all-consuming love pursuing the substance like an ever-present shadow, frightful like a hungry wolf. Passion's pitiless cruelty, its agony and torture have but seldom found better expression in Tagore than in this powerful poem built on symbol, myth and metaphysics integrated into one organic compound. Here is Krishna Kripalani's rendering of a few stanzas of 'Freudian love talking to the Platonic'.<sup>1</sup>

I understand you don't care for me. It matters little—  
for in any case you are and shall ever remain my captive,  
your spirit chained to mine in the soul's unbreakable iron.

Wherever you go, in whatever season, I follow you, close at  
your heels, a visage of darkness, a vast agony, a desperate groan,  
like the discord of a musical instrument out of time.

I am your companion from the beginning of time, for I am  
your own shadow. In your laughter, in your tears, you shall  
sense my dark self hovering near you, now in front, now behind.  
At the dead of night when you are lonely and dejected, you'll be  
startled to find how near I am seated by you, gazing into your face.

Wherever you turn I am there, my shadow sweeps over the sky  
and covers the earth, my piteous cry and my cruel laughter echo  
everywhere, for I am hunger never appeased, thirst never quenched.  
I am always there, a dagger in your breast, a poison in your mind,  
a disease in your body.

I shall chase you like a terror in the day, like a nightmare in the  
night. Like a living skeleton in a famine I shall stretch my hand

<sup>1</sup> *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography* by Krishna Kripalani, Oxford, 1962, pp. 110-111.

before you and pester you to give and give and give. Like a thorn I shall prick you day and night, like a curse I shall haunt you, like fate I shall follow you—as night follows the day, as fear follows hope.

But even so, the poet does not feel happy. He wants to do things bigger than merely painting stray pictures, singing stray notes. He feels restless because he has achieved so little yet, and this discontent expresses itself in everything he writes at this time. Already in a poem, written at Ahmedabad in 1877, he begs of the presiding deity of his life to put an end to his days that he considers to be 'useless, helpless, bereft of wisdom', and hence futile. He begs to be infused with vigour and spirit so that he might justify his existence as man, do some positive deeds that would enable him to leave an indelible mark on the sands of time. A sense of the inadequacy of the life he had been living would be weighing down on him more and more, and would be more pronounced in the next phase of his life when the dualism of a life of dream, imagination, vision and thought, that is, of a life lived purely on the subjective plane and a human concern for the objective world and natural inclination to the affairs of man and society, would be clearer. Life would oscillate between the two, and, consciously and unconsciously, the poet would strive to strike a balance between them, avoiding a direct conflict for any appreciable length of time. This maintenance of an equilibrium would be an important aspect of his personality.

Meanwhile, he had suffered two significant bereavements: one, a most tragic one and deeply felt, left a sweet poignancy on the rest of his life. 'The acquaintance which I made with death at the age of twenty-four', says the poet in *Jivansmriti*, 'was a permanent one, and its blow has continued to add itself to each succeeding bereavement in an ever-lengthening chain of tears.' Experience of death gave a new depth and richness to his knowledge of life. For some time a profound indifference to everything overcame his mind, and in this state 'the trees waving their branches against the blue sky' seemed to be inexpressibly beautiful. 'Detached, indifferent,' he says, 'I saw life against the vast background of death, saw how beautiful it was.' It is death that introduced the poet to the



bigger life of the world and its men and women, and human life with its lights and shadows is the theme of *Kaḍi O Komal*, his next work. All the poems in this volume are full of a passionate desire to know and assimilate more and more truths of life, and the poet sings: 'I want to live as man among men in this lovely, beautiful world, I do not want to die.' This, indeed, is the keynote of the whole book. This realisation, however, is the result of deep and terrible suffering, not just a facile denial of death. Before the poet could have a vision of undying life and make himself one with it, he had to pass through the baptism of death, he had to experience in all the fibres of his being the whole terror of its significance. Death is the way to life; it is always, in *Kaḍi O Komal* as much as in his last writings, an intense preoccupation of the poet.

He had also known love meanwhile, and known its pain and agony, as well as its fragrance and sweetness, its joy and romance, but perhaps not its passion and passion's cruelty and torture. The love he had known was sublime and transparent, romantic and idealistic, but in his inner self it must have taken its toll and he could not have possibly escaped its mental and physical afflictions, much as he might have struggled to overcome them.

*Kaḍi O Komal* bears the authentic impress of this experience of death, of love and life. 'In the house of life,' reminisces the poet, 'there are many mansions, many doors and corridors; one can only gaze through its window into the lamplit room, listen at the gate to the music the echoes of which come floating from the far away palace.'<sup>1</sup> And in *Kaḍi O Komal* the poet waits on the road outside the palace, imploring to be let in. But why is he so eager to enter the house of life, explore all its corners, be intimate with all the inhabitants? The poet answers in *My Reminiscences* that if one remains dozing away in lazy self-obsession one remains ignorant even of one's self. 'I passed my childhood in a prison cell, guarded by servants. My heart was always reaching out, in longing and in pain, to the bigger world outside, where I could play and run about at my ease. In youth also my heart reached out for the love of mankind, to be one with the hearts of all my fellow-beings ... Once

<sup>1</sup> *Jitansmr̥iti*, 'Bardhā O Śarat'. Free rendering by the present author.

all was cloudy and airy in my poetry, but in *Kaḍi O Komal* there is not only the clear blue sky of autumn, there is also its harvest. My poetry now lives among mankind, and concerns itself with their dealings.<sup>2</sup>

Life is no longer a chaos of fragments. It rounds itself into a perfect whole and it trembles with a mysterious, many-sided urge. With joy and eagerness the poet makes every breath of this urge his own. He finds infinite satisfaction wherever he looks: all objects, all passions and emotions, every motion of the human heart, become a part of his own deepest impulses. The poems in *Kaḍi O Komal* are about an astonishing variety of subjects: youth's many coloured dreams, love, nature, woman, beauty, children, folk-tales, patriotism, and, lastly, the wonderful and inexhaustible significance of life itself. Some of the poems contain the poet's personal reflections on life, but they are not abstract and cerebral like the usual poems of this kind; they glow with a rare intimacy of feeling. Then there is also a good number of translations from Shelley, Mrs. Browning, Christina Rossetti, Victor Hugo, Swinburne, Moore, Hood, Aubrey De Vere, Philip Marston, Ernest Myers, Mrs. Webster and an unnamed Japanese poet. But whatever the theme, the dominating mood is one of intense joy and delight in life, an acute eagerness for participation in all its enchanting seductions.

The spirit of the poems is thus the spirit of youth; youth with its passionate visions and desires, its curiosity and zest, its eagerness to know and experience everything. 'My young dreams overspread the skies', he says in a poem, and all that he sees vibrates with his desires, just as he himself vibrates with all the desires that ever have been felt. These dreams are an unending inspiration of beauty. To beauty he sings hymns wherever it exists: in women's body, in love and even in sensual passion. The poet does not despise sensuousness, for the woman's body is a fountain of beauty and all beauty is joy. Only those who, remarks the poet, condemning shallow puritans, are incapable of immersing themselves in beauty, despise it as an affair merely of the senses. But those who have experienced beauty to the depths know that the utmost power and refinement of the senses cannot reach up to it, that the anguish to know

<sup>2</sup> *Jivansmṛiti*, 'Kaḍi O Komal'. Free rendering by the present author.

more, have more, remains even after we have experienced it with all the awareness of the senses and the mind.

Physical passion is the theme of some of the most beautiful poems in *Kadi O Komal*. But, however intense the passion may be, it is not so much sensual as romantic, idealistic. In the woman's naked body he searches for 'stark and unashamed purity'; he desires to be immersed 'in the well of her body' in order that he may reach somewhere, depth below depth, the secret soul itself. As his eye gazes at the naked, beautiful body of his lover, his soul is lost among memories and images of the past, and the body and the desire for the body fade and dissolve in impalpable evocations. The desire, too, remains insatiated within the confines of the flesh. This idealistic, romantic attitude imparts a white and shining purity to his later poetry where the body is not denied but surpassed; through bodily beauty the poet has a vision of beauty itself, which lies above and beyond it; and bodily desire rarefies itself into the desire for this ideal beauty. Here, however, there are definite erotic suggestions in a number of poems, erotic but not passionate, it seems.

In other poems in *Kadi O Komal* we find another side of this romantic attitude. Even in the supreme ecstasy of love, the poet is restless, tormented by the sense that all this is so impermanent, although so exquisite, that bodily desires are a snare and an illusion because their source as well as their goal are so transient. The poet feels that a more permanent life exists, a life rooted in permanent and indestructible realities. And he yearns for a vision of this life, a vision that would be the last, the ultimate indeed, so that the very core of the mystery may be revealed. But this vision the poet never attains, for life's mystery has a depth which is unfathomable.

Then, there are a few poems that are tinged with the memory and sound and colour of fairytales that he remembered from his childhood days, and still others on childhood and children which are remarkable for their sweet tenderness. 'A Song of Benediction,' addressed to his young niece Indira, touches a high level of dignified idealism and spaciousness and is yet sweet and tender, though its length seems to affect the beauty of the piece.

There can be no doubt that *Kadi O Komal* is a fuller and



richer book than any of its predecessors, not only for the variety of its moods and themes, but also for its improved diction, metrical skill, and the variations of the sonnet form in which many of the poems are written. The book introduces a new trend altogether in Bengali poetry, and in the life and personality of the poet. In later years, the poet characterised the poems in this volume as 'a serenade from the streets in front of the dwelling of man, a plea for an entry within that house of mystery.'<sup>1</sup>

Destiny heard that plea and allowed him the entry he prayed for. And the poet knew it; he had grown conscious of his powers. The last lines of 'A Song of Benediction' contain his first declaration, in modest words, that his creations will be immortal and that one day he will be able to live as a man among men as he had been praying for.

But at times he is seized with doubt and apprehension and a sense of futility. 'What pride or justification is there in a poet's vocation, in writing verses and composing songs? It is worthy of man to thirst for and chase after images and visions that do not exist in the world of men? I shall be living in vain if I am of no service to my fellow men, if I cannot infuse new life into them and make them stronger and happier.' It is the same dualism that I have already spoken of, and it will come back again and again. The last poem, called 'The Last Word,' is significant. He feels that he has something more to say which he has not yet been able to say, and that when he will have said that there will be nothing more to say. But what that something is he does not yet know.

Will he know that ever?

*Māyār Khelā* (The Play of *Māyā*<sup>2</sup>), which was produced next, is a short musical play with a thin plot, and a chorus as in the *Vālmiki-pratibhā*, provided by the *māyā-kumārīs* or 'Maids of *Māyā*' chiming at intervals. But, as the poet says, '*Vālmiki-pratibhā* is drama woven on song, *Māyār Khelā* is song woven on drama; not action but feeling is its real base. In fact my mind was saturated with song when I wrote *Māyār*

<sup>1</sup> *Jivansmṛiti*, 'Barshā O Śarat'. Free rendering by the present author.

<sup>2</sup> *Māyā* has often been translated as Illusion, which does not convey the full meaning of the Sanskrit word.

*Khelā*.<sup>1</sup> It describes in a series of enchanting songs how a group of young men are lured by pleasure into the destructive snare of love. If we seek pleasure alone in love then love eludes us and the pleasure itself becomes unbearable pain and frustration. But love sustained by suffering is immortal: the smile that flickers behind a tear remains for ever.

Even in the midst of so much song, such feast of beauty, the poet is not distracted from what he considers to be the central mystery and meaning of love. Through all the yearnings of the body, all the charms in the world reaching out to meet it and envelop it in happiness, the poet's gaze is fixed on the truth that suffering and pain must purify our passion if it is not to be sterile, if it is not to end in consuming frustration. The body becomes a snare if our love does not learn to surpass it. In *Mānaṣī* (The Lady of the Mind, 1890), which followed *Māyār Khelā*, the anguished desire to be free from this snare and wasting illusion appears in many of its poems. This desire first appears in the play *Māyār Khelā*.

## 4

After his abortive second voyage to England (1881), when Tagore was staying with Jyotirindranath at Mussorie, he wrote his second novel, *Bau-Ṭhākuraṇīr Hāṭ* (The Young Queen's Market, 1883). It is based on a thin pseudo-historical theme. His first novel is *Karuṇā* (Pity, 1878), which I need not discuss here. *Bau-Ṭhākuraṇīr Hāṭ* is written in the prevailing fashion and pattern of romance writing set by Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and Rameschandra Dutt. Evidently he had not yet found his own form. The plot, a melodramatic one, is loose and unconvincing, and the writer himself does not appear to have been much pleased with it. 'It is very crude. I would expunge it if I were free', is what he is recorded to have told Edward Thompson, his English biographer.<sup>2</sup>

A prince, Udayāditya, of a small kingdom in the sixteenth century Bengal, suffers persecution in the hands of his father,

<sup>1</sup> *Jivansmṛiti*, 'Vālmiki-Pratibhā'. Free rendering by the present author.

<sup>2</sup> *Rabindranath Tagore: Poet and Dramatist*, p. 46.

the warrior king Pratāpāditya, for the former's sympathy and kindness for the suffering people, and is eventually exiled. His uncle, Vasanta Rāy, a simple and joyous old man, rich in wisdom, is the prince's only friend, well-wisher and accomplice. However, on his way to exile the prince escorts his loving sister, a sweet young lady, Bibhā, to the small kingdom of Chandradvīp (Barisal, now in East Pakistan) of her husband Rāmchandra Rāy, a wicked fool of a man. On arrival in Chandradvīp they learn that Rāmchandra has, in the meantime, taken another wife. Mortified and humiliated, the sister accompanies her brother to exile. At the river-*ghāt*, where they had anchored their boat, there grew up slowly a market which is still known in memory of the young queen as the Young Queen's Market.

Despite its obvious weakness as a novel, it has some importance with regard to certain thematic ideas and arrangements, as also with regard to the conception of certain characters, for these would later be exploited by the author again and again, particularly in his symbolical dramas. Here, in the character of Vasanta Ray, is the beginning of that old naive, but wise and ever-joyous, *Thākurdādā* or *Sannyāsī*; in the character of Pratāpāditya is the beginning of the insensitive king, unmindful of his people's woes and wails; and in the character of Udayāditya is the beginning of the kind-hearted, sensitive prince, very much concerned about human suffering and atoning for the sins of the father; and, then, there is also here the suffering young woman, a sweet delicate creature of circumstances. These characters will reappear, again and again, in one form or other, and in more or less similar situations.

Then, there is also another fact of some importance. Today history has a different valuation of king Pratāpāditya, but when Tagore wrote this novel, aggressive Hindu nationalism was having its days, and Pratāpāditya was regarded as a national hero. It called for some courage on the part of the young author to pull off the mantle Pratāpāditya, the hero, wore and thus take away the glamour to some extent.

His next work *Mukut* (The Crown), published in the children's magazine, *Bālak* (1884), was also a historical novel but written for the children. As a work of fiction it has very little to commend itself, but it should be recorded that years later he dramatised the story for the boys and girls of his



*āśrama*-school at Santiniketan where it was put on the stage by them time and again.

But *Rājarshi* (The Royal Sage, 1887), which followed *Mukut*, almost immediately after, is a considerable work for that early age of the author. This is a tragedy. The plot owes its origin to a dream and is woven into a pseudo-historical texture relating to the royal house of Tripura in Bengal. Tagore was returning from Deoghar to Calcutta by an overnight train journey. The compartment was crowded and he could not get a good sleep; during one of his tired dozes he had a dream. 'I saw in a dream the stone steps of a temple stained with the blood of animals sacrificed. There was a little girl standing there with her father, asking him in a piteous tone, "Father, what is this, why is all this blood here!"' The father was also moved by the sight but in his parental seriousness was trying to silence the girl. The dream broke off, but it haunted the poet. At first he gave the dream the shape and form of a novel, but five years later he created out of it a powerful drama in blank verse, *Visarjan* (The Sacrifice, 1890). This was his first significant play in this form. It was translated and published in English in 1917 as *Sacrifice*. In the novel, however, the grasp of the events and situations is so weak, there is such lack of power of objective depiction that it does not even succeed in creating a convincing atmosphere. The 'historical' figures are not alive, they have no vitality. Neither *Rājarshi* nor its predecessor, *Bau-Ṭhākuraṇīr Hāt*, shows any evidence of psychological insight, or of historical vision and imagination. Tagore used history in these novels only as a technical device, and hence there is no organic relation between his history and the men and women he created.

But one cannot ignore the fact that in both these novels the author's main preoccupation is not so much with history or situations or even with the creation of characters as with the idea of humanity in man, with human love and affection, charity and largeness. The cruel, victorious and blustering heroes of history do not appeal to him, and that explains his dislike of Pratāpāditya in *Bau-Ṭhākuraṇīr Hāt*; nor does he feel interested in the idiocy of Rāmchandra. His sympathies are decidedly with the cruel sufferings of Udayāditya, the soft and poignant tragedy of Bibhā's life, and, in *Rājarshi*, with the

large-hearted king Govindamānikya, with the innocence of the children Hāsi and Tātā, with Jayasingha, whose heart is torn by conflicting loyalties, and with Raghupati, who alone in this novel comes out as a three-dimensional figure and reveals the elements of a fundamental spiritual conflict.

With *Māyār Khelā* and *Rājarshi* young Tagore's first phase of creative expression comes to a close. He is now twenty-five, ready to cross over the threshold and enter the larger world of men and of human affairs he has somewhat vaguely been looking for. He has struck his roots and is now prepared for spreading out and making the sap of his life vital and strong so as to be able to bear fruits.

But before I take leave of this phase of Tagore's life, I cannot but refer to his other prose writings on a variety of subjects, as well as to some of his other activities in different spheres of life. The development of a personality is a total process, and one cannot afford to neglect any important aspect of the life of one's subject of biographical study.

Because of his growing stature as a poet, composer and dramatist, Tagore's early prose writings have often been ignored; yet the fact remains that these early writings, besides showing promise of higher achievements in future, constitute an interesting chapter in the history of the evolution of modern Bengali prose. One of his earliest published prose writings, an essay in literary criticism on the subject of different kinds of poetry, was published in the *Jñānāṅkur* (The Sprout of Knowledge), a literary magazine, not long after he had written *Vanaphul*. Tagore found a forum in this magazine and he poured forth an unceasing stream of writings. The short story *Bhikkhāriṇī*, which is perhaps his first attempt at story-writing, the unfinished novel *Karuṇā*, and the verse-play *Kavikāhinī*, to which I have already referred, were all published in this magazine, and, somewhat later, a series of literary essays on European, mainly English, life and letters. A few titles selected at random will show the wide range and extent of his interest: 'English Manners', 'Beatrice and Dante', 'The Anglo-Saxons and Anglo-Saxon Literature', 'Petrarch and Laura', 'Goethe', 'Chatterton', and 'Dante and his Poetry'. It was during this time that he also tried to read Heine and German literature, and Dante, Goethe and Pascal, all through English translations, and translate

freely from English and European poets to illustrate points he wanted to make in his prose essays on a wide variety of themes, written sometimes in a lighter vein, sometimes in a serious and provocative manner. Some of these essays were written when he was in England for the first time (1878). It was also from there that he wrote home a series of letters, which were published serially in the *Bhārati*. These letters give the youthful and immediate impressions of his first encounter with English life and civilisation. Written in colloquial Bengali or the *caltibhāshā*, perhaps for the first time in Bengali prose and thus blazing a new track in Bengali prose style, these letters have a literary merit of their own, and constitute a faithful record of contemporary English life and society, based on shrewd observation and an appreciative eye on the beautiful landscape of the English countryside. Later in life the poet regretted having written these letters, but why, it is difficult to understand.

In an unlucky moment I began to write letters to my relatives and to the *Bhārati*. Now it is beyond my power to call them back. These were nothing but the outcome of youthful bravado. At that age the mind refuses to admit that its greatest pride is in its power to understand, to accept, to respect; and that modesty is the best means of enlarging its domain. Admiration and praise is looked upon as a sign of weakness or surrender, and the desire to cry down and hurt and demolish with argument gives rise to this kind of intellectual fireworks.<sup>1</sup>

This was harsh judgement indeed. The marks of immaturity of a youthful mind are certainly there, but to expect maturity of understanding and a spirit of acceptance from a boy of seventeen is to expect a little too much.

About two years before (1876) he left for England, his brother, Jyotirindranath, with the active aid of Rajnarayan Bose, had founded a secret political society called the *Sanjivani Sabhā*. Its avowed aim was to liberate India from the British yoke, and young Tagore lost no time in joining it. They used to meet in an old and disintegrating building on a dark and obscure lane in Calcutta in a mysterious atmosphere. 'This

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography* by Krishna Kripalani, p. 79.



mystery was its only claim to be awe-inspiring', reminiscences the poet, somewhat amusingly at a later age, 'for as a matter of fact there was nothing in our deliberations or doings of which government or people need have been afraid. The rest of our family had no idea where we were spending our afternoons. Our front door would be locked, the meeting room in darkness, the watchword a Vedic mantra, our talk in whispers.'<sup>1</sup> I am referring to this and the following incidents in order to show the widening of the boy's range of interest and the general temper and atmosphere that obtained at that time among the sensitive Bengali élite, and how he was being irresistibly drawn into it.

Very soon after there was a terrible famine in Bengal and the people were in a hopeless state of fear and despair. Lord Lytton, the then Viceroy of India, chose that moment for holding a grand *darbar* in Delhi. The young poet (along with others) felt terribly hurt and humiliated at the callousness of our rulers and he burst into a poem which purported to be a passionate indictment of the British enslavement of India, and which he read at the *Hindu Melā* of that year. But his interests were contained not merely within his own country and people. About three years later (1880), he wrote a very strongly worded, scathing and passionate article on 'Death Traffic in China', which dealt with British opium trade in that country.

On the eve of April 20, 1891, when he sailed for England for the second time, he delivered, at the lecture theatre of the Calcutta Medical College, a public lecture on an altogether different subject, 'Music and Feeling'. This was his first appearance in public. In this lecture he sought to prove that the function of music was to express what words could not, and to support this contention a large number of songs were sung by way of demonstration.

True, poetry, drama and music were and continued to be his first concern, but he did not neglect his exercises in prose. He went on publishing, in *Bhāratī*, polemical writings on current social and political issues, and serious essays on literary and philosophical problems; these were later collected in a book of essays under the title *Ālocanā* (Discussion, 1885). They

<sup>1</sup> Quoted *ibid.*, p. 67.

served to sharpen and enrich his prose and helped him evolve a personal style for his essays.

Slightly later, he also took upon himself the burden of running a magazine. He had already been writing a great deal for the *Bhārati*, the family magazine. Now he became practically the editor of another family magazine, the *Bālak*, meant for boys and girls. He had to write for it a number of poems, nursery rhymes, stories, and at least two novels. This was indeed the beginning of his wonderfully creative writings for children, which have made him one of the world's best writers in this field.

It was also during this period that, as Secretary of the *Ādi Brāhma Samāj* (the religious society founded and led by his father), he became interested in religion and religious problems. He wrote an essay on Rammohan Roy, and several others in support of the faith resurrected and rejuvenated by Rammohan and his father. He even dared cross swords with Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, the great intellectual leader of contemporary Bengal, pleading the case for justice and humanity as against tradition and orthodoxy. A remarkable series of letters, supposed to have been exchanged between a grandfather representing tradition and obscurantism and a grandson representing the extreme modernism of a western-educated youth, shows very clearly and in a brilliant manner how the young intellect could already understand both the extreme sides of a case and plead for a balanced view and judgement. At the same time he could also be very pungent and satirical when he chose to be so, as when, at this time, he wrote a series of satires, biting and caustic, attacking the extreme reaction in favour of blind, uninformed and unreal patriotism that had come to be characterised as Aryanism and Hindu nationalism.

In our survey of the early stage of Tagore's genius we have seen that the beginning was slow, halting and hesitant. At first it hardly shows through his immature expressions, vaporous sentiments, unreal themes and airy ideas. Then, gradually, as he crosses the threshold of youth, he gains increasing command over language; his ideas, thoughts and sentiments mature, and he acquires originality in the handling of themes and situations.

By the time he was twenty-five his feet were securely on the ground and he was sure of himself. The direction of his

sensibilities was settled and the character of his emotional and intellectual attitudes, his attitudes to life and love, to suffering and death, to men and nature, and to contemporary social, religious and political problems were also taking good shape and form. His major interests, too, were standing out in no uncertain terms. An abundance of graceful fancy, of lyrical and musical talents, an almost instinctive love for man and human qualities of love, charity, kindness and understanding, and an equally instinctive distaste for bigotry, prejudice and narrowness, were being wedded to increasing intellectual vigour and active interest in the affairs of human society. As we leave this phase of his life and enter into the next, a clear and powerful personality begins to emerge.



## 6. Fruits of Maturity

1888-1900

NOW THAT TAGORE has come out of his shell and has entered the wider world of men and affairs, it would no more be possible to refer even to all his important activities and achievements, creative and otherwise, for they will be much too many and varied. All that I can do within the limitation of space is to dwell, and that too very briefly, upon some of his more significant works, such as, I think, have contributed largely to the development of his personality and of his genius as an artist in life. Since I am not aiming at what is known as academic literary criticism, I will limit the reference to the questions of art form and technique to the minimum necessary for bringing out the nature of the poet's genius and personality. Of dramas, short stories and novels a good many are, from now on, available in English translations, however inadequate, mutilated and unsatisfactory; of such works, therefore, I will give only brief resumé's to enable the readers to follow the themes. I need not analyse for my purpose the characters and situations to be found in them, unless, of course, they are related to the question of Tagore's genius and personality. I will also refrain from quoting specimens of the poetry, since one can find them elsewhere in the poet's own translations, or in those made by others.<sup>1</sup>

### 2

*Mānasī* (The Lady of the Mind, 1890) is Tagore's first book of lyrics that shows his poetical genius. Here he is not only a master of his craft but his major attitudes and approaches to life, nature, love, man, woman and society take clear and

<sup>1</sup>The poet himself, Edward Thompson, Amiya Chakravarty, Humayun Kabir, Bhavani Bhattacharyya, Krishna Kripalani and Kshitis Ray, for instance. See Bibliographical Appendix.

definite shape. The poems are marked by keen observation, subtle and passionate sensitivity, new spiritual insight, deep metaphysical content, and also by a volume and majesty of inspiration that is not to be found before in his poetry. And there is no falling off from now.

The technical mastery in these poems is revealed in the ease and grace with which the words are managed, in the rhythm and music, in the deft painting of word-pictures, and in the creation of new images. The rhythm is free and flexible, the music melodious, and the flow of lines easy and smooth. The poet's significant contribution to metric freedom really starts from *Mānasī* and *Chitrāṅgadā* (1892), the lyric-drama that follows immediately after, though the poems of *Sandhyā-Saṅgīt* (The Evening Songs, 1882) may be said to contain the first symptoms of the later flexibility. Tagore's illustrious predecessor, Madhusudan Dutt, had already broken the shackles of the current *payār* metre of fourteen syllables. By converting the *payār* into *enjambment* unrhymed lines and by introducing diphthongs, composite words, abrupt pauses, etc. he pointed the way towards substituting the syllabic structure by that of the sound. Madhusudan's pointer was a great help to Tagore who, even from the days of *Sandhyā-Saṅgīt*, began to draw *payār* closer to the natural sound values of the Bengali speech and away from the rigidity of the syllabic structure. In 'Fruitless Desire' of *Mānasī*, the poet's metrical objective of easy flow, smooth flexibility and natural rhythm of the Bengali speech makes itself felt. In *Chitrāṅgadā* he successfully exploits the metrical technique of the rhymed *enjambment*, and thus imparts to *payār* more freedom and flexibility than it was possible for Madhusudan. For another ten years or so, at any rate until *Kalpanā* (Dreams, 1900), Tagore went on adding fresh charm to this freedom and flexibility, but in *Kṣhanikā* (The Flitting One, 1900), we will find the poet making a daring discovery and holding towards a greater freedom and still more powerful flexibility. But of this, later. In the meantime, it is necessary to emphasise that the poetic quality of *Mānasī* and *Chitrāṅgadā* should be attributed, in a very large measure, to this metrical freedom and flexibility.

The poems in *Mānasī* fall, thematically, into a few broad categories: some on nature, some on the men and society of his

own time and place, some on faith and religion, then some on his ideas and thoughts woven into the texture of nature, legend or history, and, finally, some, of course, on love and desire. These with increasing scope, expanse and depth will ever be his main themes in every sphere of his creative activities.

The nature poems in *Mānasī* are significant. The very first one, 'Gift', strikes the keynote of this volume as also much of his later poetry. 'The waves of the world are dashing ceaselessly against the shores of my lonely mind. My heart, knowing no rest, gives back their echoes. So all my life I strive only to find limits for the infinite. With words breathing love and hope, I build the image of the goddess of my desire.' The vision of universal life touches the poet's soul and turns it into poetry; his melody throbs with the wonder, the beauty and the mystery of this vision. Life, eternal and infinite, is the context of all his perceptions, of all his realisations. He begins, it is true, with separate fragments of this life, but the very next moment these merge and vanish in a totality which is eternal and infinite. 'This song which I sing of gladness and hope is the breath of universal life.' Poems such as 'To Ahalyā', 'This Time and That' and 'The Cloud Messenger' bring back to us, in their deliberately Sanskritised diction, all the magic of the ancient world in music and colour, in all the wonder and beauty of nature and its seasons as the old poets saw and felt them. We see again the worlds in which Vālmiki and Kālidāsa, Jayadeva and Vidyāpati lived; we see the more ancient world of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* in all their beauty. And to all the charm of these worlds he adds a new beauty which is his own creation. There are poems which are full of the still beauty and sweetness of nature, of the quite, ineffable music that breathes through them. This beauty, this rhythm and this music are the glory of Tagore's poetry of this phase as also of the later phases. But what is more significant is the depth and boldness of imagination with which he probes into the secret and mysterious bond that unites man with nature and imparts consciousness to its supposedly mute insentient objects like stones. A poem like the one that speaks of the well-known Ahalyā story of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is only an instance in point.

It is, however, not only the quite, still aspects of nature that appeal to the poet; he is equally responsive to her wild,



relentless and destructive moods. In 'Sea Waves', for instance, a poem of rich power and magnificence, he captures, in pregnant words, in strong accents, in chosen diction, in swelling rhythm and evocative images, the fury and the sound, the terror and the destructive force of the sea swept by a cyclonic storm. Here is indeed a poetic mood of intense power, dignity and majesty. But, then, the sea-storm exhausts itself, the mood climbs down, and love comes with its arms outspread to protect the victims from all fears, and an amazed poet asks himself if this ceaseless breaking and making is not the duel of two gods, one of destruction and another of creation. This kind of ending of a tumultuous or passionate or tragic external situation in a philosophic or introspective mood is a characteristic manner of Tagore which is as much significant in understanding his personal attitude as his literary form.

The love poems in *Mānasī* do not, however, have the majesty and massive introspection of the nature poems. Tagore's love rejects physical satisfaction, is not confined in the body, and finds its fulfilment in a sphere where all passion, being passion of the idea, is fleshless. This necessarily limits our response to his love poems. We respond impersonally, as it were, and this is why one hesitates to call Tagore a love poet in the sense in which Shelley or Chandidās is a love poet. Tagore refuses to confine himself to the personal, which love tends to be. This refusal or inability, which diffuses the substance of the love poems and prevents them from reaching full crystallisation, is a source of positive power in the nature poems: it is precisely this vision of the impersonal and the universal that gives them their wonderful beauty, their deep significance. His love poems are actually poems on love.

The poet's idealistic and romantic attitude is very finely put in 'Fruitless Desire'. Bodily desire produces infatuation, clouds our vision, tempts us away from the bigger and greater things. Physical passion is only a fragment of love which is infinite, and if we abandon ourselves to a part we of course miss the whole. The poet longs to be free from the bondage of this partial, fragmentary thing, but there is always a quivering, eager and tense feeling between desire and dissatisfaction: desire for the body of one's lover and the equally passionate desire to be free from this desire. This is just a bald statement

of the theme, but the poem itself pulsates with a deeply experienced emotion; its music of words and its rhythmic cadence produce a sense of conviction that defies logic.

This attitude, of which we received hints in *Kaḍi O Komal*, is more vocal and explicit in *Mānaśī*. Love of man and woman must transcend and dissolve itself in the infinite and the eternal; it must be a focus of 'all the memories of the past, the songs of all poets of all ages, the happiness, the sorrow, the tenderness of all the world'. No wonder that a poet, whose conception of love is like this, would do inadequate justice to the intensity of physical love.

But the young poet is not wholly preoccupied with love and nature. The people and the society around him also engaged the attention of his sensitive mind. The social scene was not anything to be proud of: meanness, sham ostentation, religious and national chauvinism, cowardice, servility, inertia and humiliation lurked in darkness under the heroic and dazzling facade of political extremism. Political heroes of one day had turned social reactionaries the day next, cowards in the open became heroes in the kitchen shouting at their meek and gentle wives; patriots sought to build the country by petitioning the ruling authorities in abject servility; and heroes claimed that they belonged to the chosen race because Max Muller had said that we were Aryans! For any sensitive and intelligent person this was too much to bear with. The young poet felt hurt and humiliated, and he reacted through biting and merciless, almost savage, satire on our follies and insincerities. His gift for irony and humour are best illustrated in such poems as 'Heroes of Bengal', 'Propagation of Religion', 'The Woman Speaks', 'The Man Speaks' and 'The Lost Leader'. What many of these poems lack, however, is a certain quality of seriousness that comes from sympathy and understanding. Yet when he chooses to understand with human sympathy and imagination he can do so, as when he does in 'Propagation of Religion' in respect of the image and spirit of Christianity as personified by the Salvation Army Preacher, or in 'Lost Leader' in respect of the eight-year-old birds and in 'The Woman Speaks' in respect of the child-wife.

But 'Desperate Hope', which belongs to this category, is of a far higher order, and as a piece of art is perhaps one of the

best in this book. It has a depth of insight and a glow of passion which we do not find in the other satirical poems. The poet is sick of our destitute and unhealthy life, and rather than this nerveless complacency he would welcome even suffering; for the puny, stunted life he finds in society he would substitute one, full of robust health, restlessness, and ceaseless activity—a life in which one does not have to spend idle moments chattering but in which one can do big and heroic deeds. If such a life is not possible in civilised society, he would rather be an Arab Bedouin 'with the boundless desert stretching endlessly, the horse galloping, sands flying, pouring a stream of life into the sky, fire raging in my breast, spear in my hand, courage in my heart, homeless and free as the desert wind.' The poem has superb speed, and the music and cadence impart to it a passion that makes it superb poetry.

Amidst, however, all the manifold whispers of the soul that the poet records in *Mānañ*, one stands out more clearly in darker tones than the rest: there is a core of pain, a secret shadow that blights all that the poet desires or feels or achieves. There is also a restless desire for freedom, freedom from everything that the poet loves or holds dear, love of body and soul, love of nature even. He desires to be delivered from these loves; even the love that yearns to utter the 'stately message of life and death' does not satisfy him. The world seems to him to be too narrow, stifling in its narrowness, so that even the endlessly beautiful world of poetry, in which the poet has been dwelling so long, does not bring him joy any more. A mood of despair and resignation is unmistakable in the poems of this nature. Tagore has an explanation for this mood given to one of his younger friends, Pramatha Chaudhuri, not long after the publication of the book. 'I sometimes detect within myself a battle-ground where two opposing forces are constantly in action, one beckoning me to peace and cessation of all strife, the other egging me on to battle ... Hence this swing of the pendulum between passionate pain and calm detachment, between lyrical abandon and philosophising, between love of my country and mockery of patriotism ... This continual struggle brings in its train a mood compounded of frustration and resignation.'

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography*, p. 129.



Here is, again, that oppressive feeling of dualism I have already spoken of, and the mood generated by it that we would notice throughout his creative life, sometimes pronounced, sometimes as an undercurrent.

It is while in this mood that he feels he has been searching for one great love, the love of the divine spirit, of God in whom all his other loves of this life and the previous ones will merge, which will satisfy all his desires and interests and remove all his cravings and frustrations. Here, then, is the first beginnings of his God-consciousness, of his religious and spiritual quest that eventually found its consummation in *Gītāñjali* (Song-Offerings, 1910). The word *Mānasī* is in the feminine gender and can easily be translated as the 'Lady of the Mind' or as the 'Desire (*kāmanā*) of the Mind'. But feminine or masculine it is immaterial, since God in the Indian tradition can take any gender. The poet was asked, immediately on publication of the book, who the subject of his love poems was, and the poet's reply was: 'Man's cravings are unlimited, his capacity and reach very limited, and so he builds up in his mind an image of his desires which he can adore. The beloved in the *Mānasī* poems is of the mind only. It is my first, tentative, incomplete image of God. Will I ever be able to complete it?'<sup>1</sup>

But this God-consciousness is not yet an integral part of his personality. He has yet to probe for many years into the depth of love and nature and men and their affairs before he can make of himself an offering. Indeed, he has still serious doubt if this one great love is the real goal he is after. In 'Doubt' he asks himself: 'Am I right in wishing to merge all the little loves into one great love, to forego the light of countless stars for only one great dazzling light? Am I right to allow one obsession overwhelm all my little joys and loves and desires and beauties?'

So he comes back to love, of the body and the soul, in *Chitrāṅgadā*, the finest lyric drama he ever produced, not long after *Mānasī*. 'Many years ago', the poet has recorded for us, 'I was returning to Calcutta from Santiniketan in the month of Chaitra (March-April) when the shrubs on both sides of the railway track were displaying a fine riot of white, yellow, and brown buds. Suddenly I thought: The sun is going to be

<sup>1</sup> Quoted *ibid.*, p. 136.

too hot soon, and all the flowers will wither away. The mango blossoms will come, and they will be followed by the fruits which will bend down the village trees with their weight; thus the secret sap inside the earth will go on nourishing life endlessly, but the exuberance of the flowers will not come back. And then it seemed to me that a lovely woman might feel humiliated if she felt that she was loved for her youth and beauty alone and not for herself: she might feel that her beauty was her rival. For, her beauty was not really her own; it was only something she had borrowed from spring and bedecked herself with in order to fulfil a biological purpose. If her soul had any worth, then it was the integrity and strength of the soul that would sustain love, would make the lover and the beloved one in life. And this gift of the soul was imperishable, always bright and pure and alive, and hence life's biggest treasure. Its significance was human, not simply biological. This idea, I felt, might provide the theme for a drama, and I recalled the Chitrāṅgadā episode in the *Mahābhārata*. . . . I found time to write it in a lonely Orissa village called Pandua.<sup>1</sup>

Written in flowing and flexible blank verse with an ease which he never surpassed, the background story of this exquisite piece belongs to the *Mahābhārata*, but the twist and treatment the poet gives to this story makes it altogether an original theme. Chitrāṅgadā is plain, unattractive, masculine; but the dormant womanhood in her is awakened at the very first sight of Arjuna. He, however, sees her external ugliness only, and remains indifferent to her. Chitrāṅgadā then borrows beauty and youth from Spring and Eros and succeeds in inflaming Arjuna's passion. After ecstatic days of love Chitrāṅgadā suddenly remembers that Arjuna does not love her as he really is, does not love her soul; he loves only the sensuous beauty and luxuriousness that are external to her. She feels abased and when Arjuna, tired at last of physical pleasure, insists on knowing the real self of Chitrāṅgadā, she discards her borrowed robe of youth and beauty and stands before him in her naked self. Then the two come really together, soul embracing soul, in an everlasting marriage.

The poet's logic is clear. It is the same as we saw in *Kaḍi O*

<sup>1</sup> 'Sūchanā', *Chitrāṅgadā*. Free rendering by the present author.

*Komal* and *Mānasī*. Love cannot deny or bypass the reality of the body's desire; but a love which never learns to go beyond the body knows no real fulfilment, no peace, and is, therefore, unreal. With young Tagore, this is no abstract idea but as real and concrete as the love that is yet centred in the body. Fulfilment is reached when soul joins soul in a fusion which is complete, rounded and permanent, since mere bodily union is fragmentary and partial. It is only when Arjuna and Chitrāṅgadā love in this way, are united in this way that they discover themselves. This is perhaps what one may call is Tagore's attitude to love, an attitude which is broadened and enriched in his later poetry.

But such an ideology necessarily leads to a contradiction between body and soul, which then become disparate and irreconcilably conflicting entities. We shall find this conflict many a time in the poet's writings in many forms, but its basic nature remains the same throughout. One does not notice this intellectual contradiction in the lyric poems; there it is resolved into the emotional and aesthetic beauty of the lyric itself. But in drama, as much as in stories and novels, where love is concretised and works out its laws in individual characters and situations and in their interactions, the conflict is explicit. Equally explicit is the inadequacy of such a conception of love before life's concrete situations, as in that of *Chitrāṅgadā*. One may argue that a harmonious rhythm between body and soul, a due concord between them, is a finer and happier conception of love and life. In actual life this equilibrium would sometimes be disturbed, resulting in sorrow, anguish and frustration. But life itself tends to restore the equilibrium, and love is the means by which this is done. Such an equilibrium is perhaps the conclusion of *Chitrāṅgadā*. But its premises are doubtful, since they make body and soul irreconcilably hostile.

But *Chitrāṅgadā* is neither a didactic tract nor a philosophical treatise on love. Its theme is the human spirit with its passions and longings, its infinite mysteries. As Arjuna and Chitrāṅgadā pass from experience to experience, depths of emotion and wisdom are revealed in them, of whose existence even they themselves were ignorant, and their souls are laid bare in poetry which is unsurpassed in its pure and rich music, in its concentrated significance. No quotation, far less any translation, can



give any idea of the greatness of the poem as a whole. The English rendering by the poet himself<sup>1</sup> falls far short of the rich music and magic of the original. The play succeeds, not so much as a play but as enchanting and significant poetry. It succeeds inspite of its rigid and doubtful premises. It succeeds because of the inner laws of art, the laws of beauty, and this beauty we see in the unflinching integrity of the poet's vision (although it is so introspective and basically unreal), in the superb loveliness of the separate parts, in the harmony of the situations, and in the perfection of the structure as a whole. There is no doubt that *Chitrāṅgadā* is great poetry, and it is great because of its delicate psychological construction, because of its glorious descriptions, because of the tenderness and grandeur of the passion it portrays, because of its rich sensuousness, evocative image and metaphors, and because of its music and melody. Lastly, its significance is deep and many-sided, and the radiance it sheds on the central mystery of love itself belongs to great poetry alone.

What is nebulous and halting in *Kaḍi O Komal, Mānasī* and *Chitrāṅgadā* takes perfect shape and form and strides along in vigour with effortless dignity and graceful poise in *Sonār Tarī* (The Golden Boat, 1894), *Chitrā* (The Multi-Coloured, 1896), *Chaitālī* (The Last Harvest, 1896), and *Kalpanā* (Dreams, 1900). The vision of *Mānasī* and *Chitrāṅgadā* the poet now embodies in magnificent poetry: this vision of beauty existing in and irradiating all that is, this vision of love of the body and yet beyond and above it. In *Sonār Tarī*, *Chitrā* and *Kalpanā*, we find poetry which defeats analysis because of its profound harmony and incisive penetration. There is also, from now on, a new sense of absolute oneness with nature and man, a tranced and absorbed communion with the whole of existence. Everywhere he finds the same abundant flowering of love and beauty, everywhere a response to the rapture in his soul.

But there is yet something more. Love and beauty no longer roam in a subtilised, cold, dehumanised atmosphere; with folded wings they brood over this real world so full of beauty everywhere, 'this world marked with love of generations of mankind, furrowed over with generations of loving and suffering, echoing

<sup>1</sup> *Chitra*, India Society, London, 1913.

with songs all through the ages'. What is love and what is beauty, if not the fierce and passionate longing to penetrate from the surface into the depth of things, to clasp all life in an embrace which nothing can break, to probe, beneath the diversities that throb and agitate on the surface, into the mysterious and ineffable calm of unity on which they float? All the various emotions and thoughts of man, all the beauties around us have a common source and are thus essentially one, although we do not see the oneness but see only the disparities. The search for this unity and oneness and wholeness is the essence and substance of all his poetry from *Sonār Tarī* onwards: the attempt, in other words, to distil love and beauty from the earthly compound in which it exists for the common man, and to realise them in his soul in their pure and abstract essence. Concurrently, the poet acquired a new attitude to the common and daily life and, discovered in it hidden springs of joy and loveliness that he had not known before. This was the direct effect of his beginning to stay at this time in the very heart of rural Bengal in connection with the management of their ancestral property.

The poet's mastery of his craft is also complete. The words begin to live and sing in his poetry as never before. There is no longer the formless exuberance of his early verse. Instead, there is a restraint, a purity of diction and metre, an assured discipline that brings immeasurable dignity and majesty to his verse. The gains in metric freedom and flexibility, already noticed in *Mānasī* and *Chitrāṅgadā*, are fully exploited and consolidated. Form and content have developed and matured alike. There are poems in *Sonār Tarī*, *Chitrā*, *Kāhinī* (Tales, 1900), and *Kalpanā*, whose stately, massive power and structural dignity are beyond illustration and analysis; and they are untranslatable. Along with a new outlook on life the poet has also developed a new and wonderful language in which to clothe his visions, an accession of power in all directions.

In works of his early adolescence, the poet's main preoccupation was with the world of beauteous dreams and of the richness of nature; in the next stage, reflected in *Sandhyā-Saṅgīt*, there is a sense of inadequacy of dreams and a certain restlessness with the mere enjoyment of the varied beauties of nature. In *Prabhāt-Saṅgīt* there is an attempt at exploration of human

relationship, to find a basis of unity between man and nature. In *Mānasī* and *Chitrāṅgadā* the consciousness of this unity deepens in terms of the universal principles of joy, harmony, love and beauty. From *Sonār Tarī* to *Kalpanā*, these universal principles are concentrated into one particular, yet all-pervasive, principle, which the poet chooses to call the principle of *Jīvan-devatā* (The Deity of Life) that guides his own self. In *Chitrā* and *Chaitālī* the principle has clearer outlines, and a greater relevance and volume of meaning than in *Sonār Tarī*. From now on it accompanies the poet throughout, going with him increasing richness, increasing complexity, and increasing integration, until it becomes a part of his self.

The concept of *Jīvan-devatā* has been commented upon a little too much and the poet has added to the confusion by trying to explain it from different moods and situations. From the point of view of the evolution of his self, and insofar as his creative activity is concerned, the *Jīvan-devatā* is but the concretised expression of his hitherto undefined craving for a great love and light which will take in all his other loves and lights, for a universal principle that will permeate and govern his relations with man and nature, the first glimpse of which one saw in *Mānasī*. Now it was something concrete: at the same time it satisfied the poet's deep urge, at any rate for this phase of life, for the universal and the infinite. Not before the next phase of his life, that is, from *Naivedya* (Offering, 1901) to *Gītāñjali* (Song-Offering, 1910), *Gītīmālya* (A Garland of Songs, 1914) and *Gītālī* (A Bunch of Songs, 1914), did the realisation dawn on him that if the universal was defined in the concrete of the *Jīvan-devatā*, the infinite was defined in the finite of humanity and that finite humanity was ever trying to reach the horizons of the infinite. In the *Sonār Tarī-Chitrā* phase this experience had thus reached only half the circle, while the other half had yet to be reached, and that was done in the next phase, the one represented by the *Naivedya* through to *Gītālī*.

There is no need to discuss the scientific basis or validity of the experience of this idea, that of a Deity mysteriously presiding over the poet's life. It is enough to know that an intense feeling of oneness with nature and man constitutes the essence and foundation of his *Jīvan-devatā* conception. The nature poems of the phase under review contain beautiful and revealing



descriptions of nature, but this is not what makes them so remarkable, especially from *Mānaṣi* onwards. Their peculiar character emanates from a certain quality of their atmosphere which lifts them out of and above the immediately perceptible sensuous sphere. This quality has lent them a subtle and powerful emotional cadence, a soft and plaintive tenderness, distant whispers, a glow of joy and pain. The appeal of these poems is complex, multitoned, corresponding to the depth and truth and complexity of their inspiration. Nature and man, the poet seems to suggest in them, are one; they breathe the life and feel the same joys and sorrows and passions. What man feels of beauty and love is echoed back from the depth of nature's spirit; man and nature together indeed form the wonderful and perfect whole which inspires the poet with grand and beautiful visions.

The allegorical significance of 'The Golden Boat', the title-piece of *Sonār Tārī*, has been much discussed, among others, by the poet himself. Such speculations, however, do not quicken our response to the poem at all, and rather than recapitulate them or substitute one of our own we shall consider the poem itself. We feel a nameless, melancholy yearning, undirected yet definite, as we read the lines; the month of *Śrāvaṇ* (July-August) and its interminable showers, the swollen, turbid river and the swiftly gliding boat, the palm and bamboo trees on its banks dripping and pattering with the rain, the grain stacks heaped on the river banks and in the passing boats, the wet, half-naked peasants reaping the grain with monotonous, ceaseless diligence. With this yearning we feel, too, the pensiveness, the soft and quivering melancholy which is always a part of the atmosphere during the rains in riverine Bengal. And a sensitive soul becomes aware of a third, enveloping mood: of beauty touched with a sense of pain and loss. All this, surcharged further by the accumulated collective consciousness of centuries, may be no more than a transient mood; and only those who have felt it keenly and intensely can tell what an imperious and sweeping claim it makes—this mood, which seems so light at first, on much an affair of the moment—on all our possessions and accumulations, on even those we treasure most. We cannot but recognise this claim and yearn to make the supreme sacrifice which we do without effort or sorrow. Indeed we are eager to surrender ourselves, our souls as well, since this

sole remaining possession troubles us. But nature, beautiful and cruel, does not accept this self-surrender and leaves us burdened with our soul. So, instead of the joy of fulfilment there is for us only the bitter pain of loss. Here is an imaginative idea which will be echoed again and again in many of his later poems.

This sorrow, this unbearable frustration, because nature seems to take away all the accumulated treasure of man leaving him only with his lonely soul, may be a frail, evanescent mood, but it is also one of the deepest, most vital facts of experience, and this, combined with the melancholy evoked traditionally by the rains of *Śrāvan*, produces the ineffable piece of 'The Golden Boat'.

Unbreakable emotional bonds, we thus see, connect us with nature. Nature, taken in an extended sense, inspires some other poems in *Sonār Tari*. They contain beautiful descriptions, but their true significance lies deeper. Man and nature, in Tagore, interpenetrate every area of human experience, and it is this interpenetration, this inter-relation, that gives the life and beauty of nature their most important significance for us. If nature did not feel man's joys and sorrows, then she would be inert, lifeless, barren. Nature feels all the man's passions and emotions that man feels; every motion of the human soul raises a corresponding vibration in her. The long but uniquely beautiful piece, 'I won't let you go', is inspired by a vision of nature sorrowing with man. 'The beautiful Lady of Imagination' and 'To the Sea', too, show the same intimate emotional kinship between nature and man; nature's joy and passion inspire the lovely music of 'The Cosmic Dance' and 'The Swing'.

This entranced and blissful contemplation of nature, which inspires poem after poem of magnificent music and meaning, belongs especially to this phase of the poet's life. They take away our breath by their beauty, by their fragile, and dream-like atmosphere, by their subtle and delicate grace, and by their evocation of classical myths and legends. There are wonderful word pictures, pictures of rural-agricultural Bengal with her immense green plains washed by the mighty waters of the Padmā. Supremely beautiful pictures they are, and round them cluster other, bodiless images, evocations and suggestions. Absorption in the unending beauties around us, and an equally sensitive and quivering absorption in the life of men

and women—these two together produce the great and wonderful poetry of *Sonār Tārī*. The two visions, that of nature and that of man, come together in the best poems, which are unsurpassed in their majesty and significance. And this vision of an intense and inseparable bond that connects man and nature so that the ripples of the Padmā and those of the life of the men and women who live on its banks have something common between them is also to be found in the letters written at this time, and collected and published under the title *Chhinnapatrāvalī* (Torn Leaves, 1960), and in the short stories of this period.

The poetry of *Sonār Tārī* is indeed the poetry of the Padmā. 'At that time', says the poet, 'I sailed about in a boat from village to village in Bengal. It was a novel experience indeed, and the novelty lay in the continuous movement and in the variety of the scenes I saw. But I felt much more than my eyes saw, for all the time I was conversing with my country, feeling her with my soul. . . . What I learnt and realised thus will be found in the short stories I wrote then. . . . Harsh seasons followed mild ones, but my boat was always on the Padmā; she was my shelter in the burning *Vaisākh* days, in the showery days of *Śrāvan*. As I sailed along one bank I could see the green woods and shadows of the village on the other side; on this side grey and desolate sand banks stretched till they were lost in the horizon. The river between the sands and the village was like a canvas on which some skyey artist was painting all sorts of pictures, and then wiping them out. I listened to the sounds and echoes of man's daily life; he came very close to me indeed, and I felt a passionate interest in him. Besides preparing schemes for his welfare, I also worked for him and planned to do many things in the days to come. I have such thoughts and plans yet . . . And after this close and passionate contact, my literature and my life could not follow divergent paths as before: the two now ran side by side. Not for a single moment was I indifferent or half-awake during these years of wanderings; I eagerly absorbed every experience that came in my way, every experience of man and nature. *Sonār Tārī* contains the first poetic harvest of this phase.'<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 'Sūchanā', *Sonār Tārī*. Free rendering by the present author.



Incidentally, Tagore's poems, songs and short stories from now onwards become informed with a spaciousness that they had never known before. Space in traditional Indian thought is not just void; it is not quantitative largeness either, nor has it the romantic significance of western conception. Tagore seems to have followed the Indian classical conception, essentially Upanishadic, and equated space with ultimate peace and harmony; it is, with him, qualitative spaciousness, the ever-widening of the horizon of vision in calm response. This quality of spaciousness, which indeed became a part of his being, was partly the gift of the Padmā, that wide and mighty river which stretched before his eyes while he took up his residence at Shelaidah, the headquarters of the Tagore ancestral estates, now in East Pakistan. Here, for the first time, he touched the soil of rural Bengal and her simple unsophisticated people. The wide stretches of sand, on both sides of the current of life around him, impressed him very deeply and gave him an understanding of what the ancient seers knew as the peace of space or *bhumā*. This sense of spaciousness and peace imparts to the poems in *Sonār Tarī*, *Chitrā*, *Chaitālī* and *Kalpanā*, and to the long series of short stories written during this period of life a dynamic expansiveness and an yearning for limitless horizons.

*Chitrā* and *Chaitālī* continue this phase. In *Sonār Tarī* the poet's vision is not clear enough yet, his realisation of nature not yet full: doubts, hesitations, apprehensions are still there. He does not know what the goal is, where the pilgrimage in nature, the absorption in her, will end, what harbour will receive the golden boat in which the poet sails. The throbbing sea gives no answer, and when he asks the fairy lady who is his companion, she only points with her finger at the far away horizon against which the sun is setting and the sea beating endlessly.

In *Chitrā*, however, the poet has realised his direction and destination. There is now no longer the least barrier between him and nature; he knows what he has been seeking for. He is now one with nature; in the experience of this oneness all his doubts and apprehensions vanish. Instead there is now a deep clam of soul, an easy and assured delight, a resting in peace that fulfilment alone can give. A magic, the poet feels,

has transformed his soul utterly. What is this magic? He does not know, but 'my breast heaves with the pain of joy ... bright, keen and fiery intoxication has set my heart dancing'. He feels in his heart 'the pain of endless separation, of infinite desire, indeed all the pain of the world'. All seems to him to be a sport, 'the sport of a wanton goddess who sits in the heart of his soul'. The poet's soul seems to be reborn in new loveliness and glory, and the poems in *Chitrā* glow with them.

The experience of complete identity with nature produces such poems as 'The Celestial Nymph' (*Ūrvaśī*), 'Farewell from Heaven', 'The Victorious Lady', and 'In the year 1400'. No analysis and no translation can give any idea of the 'rounded perfection and felicity of loveliness' of these poems. 'Ūrvaśī' is a hymn to abstract beauty, beauty purged of the disfiguring contact of daily needs, of human passions and desires. Ūrvaśī is an image of pure beauty, the image that has haunted and distracted all the generations since the Vedic past, the vision of which has inspired so many beautiful and sorrowful songs down the ages. It is for this immortally stainless beauty of Ūrvaśī that we long, without knowing it in all our loves and desires. We try to clasp it, but it ever eludes our eager grasp. This, however, is the bare meaning of the poem; its real beauty lies in the sheer loveliness of the words and rhymes and images, in the firm yet subtle evocations, in the echoes, but transformed echoes, of a remote mythology in all its parts, and, finally, in the massive imaginative power which the poem as a whole displays.

The experience of this oneness with nature, of this love and beauty, sensuous and supersensuous, we perceive as Tagore's *Jivan-devatā*. It is here that he finds the soul of his soul; he lives with it for a whole poetic phase. Now, at its end, he asks him if he has no more demands to make, if he too has found fulfilment. The other poems in *Chitrā* answer the question: for if anything had remained unfulfilled, any demand unsatisfied, there would not have been that secure peace and delight, that absorbing tranquillity, which complete attainment alone can give. The phase that begins with *Prabhāt-Saṅgīt* reaches a perfect consummation here. It is a phase that includes many and various experiences, intuitions, realisations, and the final issue is perfectly satisfying.

And the poet knows it. He knows that all his longings for love and beauty have been fulfilled, and he can look forward with confidence to the far away future when he will be no longer alive but his name and fame will remain. The songs he has sung are the songs of the future as well, and he knows it.

In *Chitrā* there is one poem which is not like others, and a reference should be made to it. Deep in him the poet had a nomad's soul and he could not remain tied for long to any particular place. Every now and then he would wonder out in search of new people, new scenes, new activities. And we notice the same restlessness in his spiritual life. Over and over again the poet revolts against the introspective and personal world to which his genius is habitually confined, and he wants to go out and immerse himself in the whirls and eddies of the life outside. Sometimes the wails and groans of the disinherited break into and shatter his lonely and secluded world, and the poet's heart bleeds in sympathy and pity. In one such mood the poet wrote 'Turn Me Back Now', a poem which, as I have already mentioned, is like no other in *Chitrā*. In magnificent and sincere eloquence the poet describes the squalid wretchedness in which most men and women of the world are doomed to live and declares that henceforth he will live and write for them alone. But the mood vanishes (to return again and again), and the poet once more returns to his detached, introspective self. Here is again the same conflict of dualism which I have already referred to more than once.

Comparing *Chitrā* with *Sonār Tarī*, we notice that in the former there is a greater crystallisation, an intenser absorption of experience. The current of life that flows between nature and man has a smoother, more assured motion, as it were, in *Chitrā* than in *Sonār Tarī*. The other volume has a more spontaneous exuberance, and its lyrics of simple joys and sorrows have a superb ease and grace. But in *Chitrā*, besides the qualities of ease and grace, we have the more strenuous qualities of intensity, restraint, a disciplined purity; altogether, *Chitrā* shows a more mature sensibility. Sensuous and immediate joy in life is not replaced but transformed: the joy is there, but it goes with deeper and more difficult experiences of life, experiences that lie beyond the senses. With the operation of the senses is combined the operation of the intellect and the spirit. The poet's vision



of human life reaches deeper levels, and all the significant experiences of mankind become his own.

It is natural, therefore, that his intensely subjective imagination should now be reaching out for points of contact with man's ordinary life. On one side, there is the poet's personal and lonely world; on the other, the busy and humdrum world in which everybody's lot is thrown. But is there really any conflict between them, the poet seems to ask, and says, 'no'; both to him are equally true and valid, although they exist differently. The same spirit is manifested in diverse forms in the external world, in one united entity in the internal world; and poetry must echo both these aspects. In 'Turn Me Back Now', we hear the echo of the diverse and active world of daily life; in 'Solicitation', the other world of his lonely self where he is alone with his Deity of Life. Indeed, in the second poem, the poet says to the spirit of poetry, 'My place is not in the busy and restricted world of action and crowd but with you in lonely communion.' The world consists of both the sky and the earth, without any contradiction, he seems to argue; the same spirit can be both one and many in its manifestations, without any contradiction. There are many poems in *Chitrā* which deal frankly with quotidian affairs; in other poems the upper world comes down to meet the lower.

*Vidāy-Abhiśāp* (The Curse at Farewell,<sup>1</sup> 1894), written as verse-drama, is really a lyric like *Chitrāṅgadā*, although it is more objective. Like *Chitrāṅgadā*, its theme is drawn from that vast storehouse of Indian lore, the *Mahābhārata*, but the poet invests the story with new meaning and with a quiet dignity that one does not find in the original. Kach is deeply attached to the *āśrama* (hermitage) in which he has been educated, and to Devayānī, the daughter of his preceptor, Śukrāchārya. Perhaps he loves her too. But he is yet attached more passionately to his *dharma* or duty as a student loyal to his teacher and to the ideals to the *āśrama* life. This integrity is indeed the chief glory of his character. Devayānī, on the other hand, loves Kach with a purely human love, with a warmth and tenderness that is touching. When Kach refuses her love she curses him, but he blesses her in return. To the reader, how-

<sup>1</sup> 'The Curse at Farewell' in *The Fugitive*, Macmillan, 1921.

ever, both the blessing and the curse, both Kach's integrity and strength and Devayāni's purely human reaction, are equally true and significant. And both the characters are highly poetic, one in his quiet strength and dignity, the other, in her tender evocations of love.

*Vidāy-Abhiśāp* is characterised by a unique quality of restraint in the expression. In his earlier poetry, Tagore was at times somewhat profuse and extravagant; the spontaneity of his inspiration, like an outside force stronger than his will, seemed to have taken possession of him and swept him away from all discipline, thus hindering the assertion of his conscious will. But in this small piece of a lyric drama, one notices with satisfaction a conscious restraint, a curbing of expression, which may have been imparted somewhat by the dignity and restraint of Kach's character.

## 3

*Chaitāli*, Tagore's next volume of poems, was named after the year's last harvest, 'because most of these poems were written in Chaitra', the last month of the Bengali year. He may also have felt that they were the last harvest of his poetic life. They do, in any case, mark the end of a phase.

We saw in *Chitrā* that life was ever-ripe, about to brim over, with love and beauty, with the realisation of his Deity of Life. In the very first piece in *Chaitāli* the poet says, 'The trees in my vine-yard are bent down with their heavy load of bunches of ripe and rounded fruits. And the fruits are going to burst, so ripe and full of juice they are. Come, take them in your fingers and pluck at them hard with your teeth.' In the poem itself, however, these words are said in cadenced, passionate verses, the music of which no paraphrase can convey.

The poet has started feeling that a phase has reached its end and has nothing further to offer; he is therefore somewhat restless. But in *Chaitāli* the restlessness is not definite yet, and both in this and in the next volume, *Kalpanā*, there are poems which recall the satisfied absorption in nature of the *Sonār Tarī* days. This is not strange at all: the transformation

of one phase into the succeeding one is sometimes a prolonged process. Even when it is complete, and the new phase begins, its configuration does not become clear all at once and the past keeps coming back. The first rumblings of this impending change are heard in *Chaitālī*: they are clearer in *Kalpanā*, but it is not until *Naivedya* (The Offering, 1901), and *Kheya* (The Crossing, 1906), that the transformation completes itself and assumes definite outlines. The period between *Chaitālī* and *Naivedya* may thus be called one of transition.

In the fourteeneers of *Chaitālī* the poet is getting away from the aptitudes and emotions of *Sonār Tarī* and *Chitrā*, and new ones begin to emerge. A deep fullness, a wholeness of experience that consumes every object and connects human life and nature with the bond of love is the keynote of the poems. Nature, man, even the most trivial happenings shine out with a new and white glory. He looks into the past, the distant past of his own country and people, and comes to realise that the civilisation of ancient India best expressed this glory and nobility in which lay enshrined life's inmost significance, and that the spirit of ancient India was symbolic of the spirit of humanity at its truest and noblest. He feels grieved when he compares this ancient greatness of soul with the poverty and meanness that infect and corrode contemporary life. We have, the poet tells us in a deep anguish of soul, lost the sense of life's wholeness and are frittering it away unfeelingly and ingloriously. This anguished vision we find in many of the poems in *Chaitālī*. That humanity, that love of the earth, that reverence for the ancient Indian tradition which we find in *Chaitālī* are clearer in his *Naivedya*, a later work, and many have described the earlier work as a preface to the latter. A new life dawns upon the poet, although the old one has not yet faded out.

But neither artistically nor psychologically is *Chaitālī* in a direct line of evolution from *Sonār Tarī* and *Chitrā*. From the sensuous and immediate joy in life that we find in *Sonār Tarī* to the more intellectualised inspiration of *Chitrā* succeeds the somewhat faint, half-detached outlook that we find in *Chaitālī*. There is no evolutionary connection, it seems, between the first two works and the last, and the poet is himself aware of this somewhat freakish origin and position of *Chaitālī*. '*Chaitālī* is so unexpected', he has said, 'because I did not know for the



time being in what direction my mind had begun to work. I could only accumulate external things, and hence the poems of *Chaitāli*!<sup>1</sup>

The fourteen-line poems are too loose in structure to be properly called sonnets; and it is, indeed, this structural looseness, which goes with a certain toning down of the emotional content, that characterises the typical poems in *Chaitāli*. Since nowhere have they the feverish intensity of lyric poems, it is better to call them sketches: sketches of India's past, of Bengal's village life, in subdued tints and simplified outlines. Intensity would be out of place when the subjects are so modest, a description sometimes and a story or an allegory elsewhere. Their background is the familiar scenes of riverine Bengal: sand banks, paddy-fields and bushes. There is thus, in all these poems, a reminiscent atmosphere; the poet seems to be recalling a beautiful past, in which, however, he took no intense part. 'The eye recorded these scenes like a camera as I looked out through the shutters of the boat's window. I saw them so well because they were all confined to such a small orbit: and this distinctness made ornaments unnecessary when I wrote the poems about them.'<sup>2</sup>

During the transition period, an astonishing change takes place in Tagore's attitude and perspective: his whole sensibility takes on a different direction. The world of love and beauty of *Sonār Tari* and *Chitrā* fades out gradually, leaving, of course, deep traces on the poet's soul. Now, however, the poet aspires for more strenuous achievements, aspires to penetrate into the deepest core of life, to attain to a final realisation of life's mission. The wonder and delight and diversity of this world do not absorb him any more, for the distant vision of a higher life beckons his soul, enthralls it. He searches for higher values, to begin with, in the life and culture of ancient and medieval India.

Of this new attitude we shall find few traces in the transitional work, but traces there are. *Kāhīnī*, his next work, consists of a number of dramatic lyrics which I shall refer to later. They draw their themes and inspiration mainly from

<sup>1</sup> Free rendering by the present author.

<sup>2</sup> 'Sūchanā', *Chaitāli*. Free rendering by the present author.

ancient Indian myths and legends; in all of them the poet established the superiority of the eternal law of human truth over contemporary customs and social habits. *Kathā*, too, has a similar content. The stories of its poems and ballads are derived from India's past history. The poet shows that many of its trivial and forgotten episodes are lighted up by extraordinary heroism, generosity, sacrifice, fortitude. Once again, the ever-abiding greatness of the human soul inspires the poet; it is in this greatness, this inherent nobility that he finds the most elemental truth about man.

The poet's attitude to Indian tradition is changing. In his youth it was the sensuous, earthly aspect of it (one which is preserved in the glorious Sanskrit literature) that attracted him. Old Indian poets like Vālmīki and Kālidāsa he studied with a sensitive mind, and steeped himself thoroughly in their lovely world—how thoroughly we can see in all his works from *Bhānusiṃha* *Thākurer Padāvalī* to one, as late as *Chitrā* in which we come across many poems in which he recreates this ancient world with an intense and concentrated fidelity. But from *Chaitālī* onwards his attitude changes; he begins to see another, profounder aspect of the ancient tradition. It seems to him that life in the ancient world, so beautiful in its simple surroundings, had a wholeness and integrity of idealism that the inchoate and parcelled out life of today lacks. More and more it is the deathless glory and nobility of the human soul that he seeks beneath the outward and trivial trappings, that glory and nobility which place man on a level with the gods and the ancient seers. It is no longer human beauty but human greatness that he seeks to explore and realise. The poetry of the old poets brings to him now a more spiritual significance, an apprehension of more serious and profound truth. The poet makes himself one with his glory of the human spirit; and this glory is the inner substance of both *Kathā* and *Kāhīnī*.

Here it is relevant to take note of the intellectual atmosphere that prevailed in the country at the time. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, there was a resurgence of national consciousness in Bengal, and the history and culture of the past became objects of ardent attention and study. For many years the revival was confined to the theological and mythological works

of ancient India, but Bankimchandra and Rameshchandra brought about a reorientation by popularising the study of the historical aspects of the ancient tradition, history and romance, and, finally, the moral and spiritual values that upheld this tradition. A new kind of patriotism, inspired by these new values, brought a new upsurge among the educated middle classes, at first accompanying and later outpacing the spread of western education and culture. The ancient history of the country began to be studied as well, and nowhere with more passionate creative interest than in the Tagore family.

At the beginning of this century this national and cultural revivalism inspired in Bengal the ideology of the great *Svadeśī* movement. Tagore was an assiduous student of the history of India and he fully realised the significance of the newly emerging social consciousness and its patriotic afflatus. The results of his historical studies are embodied not only in narrative verse, as in *Kathā* and *Kāhinī*, but also in several social and historical essays he wrote at the time.

It is well known that the poet played a great part in the *Svadeśī* movement as its spiritual leader; the foundation of this leadership was laid in these years. India came to mean to him a concrete spiritual entity, its tradition a repository of essential human values. Such a conception of history may by many be considered out of date, but however unscientific and inaccurate Tagore's attitude to history may appear, we must never forget that it was a part of the national consciousness of the time and that it moulded national action in a significant way. It was this idealistic-cum-spiritual outlook on history that inspired the *Svadeśī* movement.

All the poems in *Kathā* are historical; those in *Kāhinī* are imaginative; they have nevertheless the same roots in tradition. But *Kāhinī*, besides the verse-tales, contains a few dramatic poems, and these have a different source. Except *Lakshmīr Parikshā* (Test of Lakshmī) and *Safī* (The Chaste Woman), all are derived from Indian legends, and the last named comes from the Marathi ballads, nearly as authentic as history. But historical or legendary or imaginative, they have all the same inner stuff, and, really speaking, they are all Tagore's own creation, for the characters are his, the stories are modified and reshaped so as to express certain personal attitudes and evalua-



tions. They have none of the simplicity and clear meaning of their legendary material, but are complex and full of doubts and conflicts, and of attempts to find solutions of these in new ideals.

*Kaṇikā* (Chips, 1899) is a collection of short poems and epigrams, didactic or allegorical or ironical. Some of these are like popular proverbs in their terse and homely jingle, and only a few have real poetic beauty. Most of the poems, like those in the later *Lekhan* (Autographs in Verse, 1927), belong to the species of keepsake verses, but the verses in *Lekhan* are much more serious and deeper in content, and brighter in epigrams. What, however, is worthy of notice in this series of short poems and epigrams are the specks of wisdom so often lighted by wit.

*Kalpanā*, as I said, crystallises this transitional phase. That is why it has such a complex content, composed of so many contradictory strands. The two worlds stand out clearly and in opposition: on the one side is the world of love and beauty and nature that belongs to *Sonār Tarī* and *Chitrā*, a world which is enriched with a deep and mature culture, vibrant with music. On the other side is the world of deep contemplation, an inner world of the self withdrawn from the external world. Not that nature has nothing to do with these poems. One must not expect clear-cut, one tract attitude in the poet, which can be facilely identified. Even a single poem is sometimes a pattern of multiple and contrary feelings and attitudes, but a pattern, we must remember, and not a jumble. Analysis, however, will discover one dominant strand, round which all the others cluster and from which they diverge, and in the case of *Kalpanā*, it is the attitude of self-absorbed contemplation, the effort to investigate the secret roots of the soul that struggles to be dominant above the rest.

Nature inspires 'Invocation to the Rains'. The rain's melody is the melody struck by poets of many ages, those poets of India's past who sang so charmingly when the rains arrived at last after summer's parching days. The poem is full of echoes from them. Indeed, so steeped is the poet in the classical poetic tradition, so completely has he absorbed it in his sensibility that he can never get away from them.

We shall find some love poems in *Kalpanā*: 'Dream' among them is exquisitely poignant; but, as I have already pointed

out, Tagore's love is not based on the perfect harmony of soul and body on the physical plane. It is not the painful physical ecstasy of love but the beauty that belongs to it that the poet is after; to him, this beauty is not individual at all, but only a part of the larger, universal beauty. It is this kind of love which we find in the poems in *Kalpanā*; but it is clear that love no longer has the same significance for the poet as it once had. The poet is still fascinated by love and beauty, their delight has been his companion for so many years, but other feelings, other desires and passions, the shapes of which are not clear yet, are emerging, and this indistinctness is once more a cause of anguish. There is naturally a state of tension. And this tension inspires some of the stateliest and most beautiful poems in *Kalpanā*. The self-conscious poet knows that he is passing through a transition, through a gloomy and uncertain period, in which all the light and music of the past are drowned by the ocean's angry and sullen roar and by 'evening's sterile shadows'. A sinister charm has made all song silent; 'a great fear overspread my soul and all the horizons are hidden under a black veil'.

The darkness does not last however. In 'Call' light and music from another world dissolve the languorous rest in which the poet had thought to live out his days. The poet resents at first: is not he too tired in body and soul to strive again? But his *Jivandeavatā*, ruthless and unsparing, will not desist from its incessant and peremptory demands. One phase of life is over; if the poet had hoped for night's darkness and restful sleep after a hard day's toil, he was wrong indeed, for another day was breaking. 'Night and the peace of night and the dream that soothes my mind I lay aside, and return to life. My limbs are tired, but I must obey your command.'

As soon as the poet is firm in his resolve, the old life, with its smiles and tears, its loveliness and tenderness and music, fades out utterly; instead, there looms before the poet the vision of a 'vast, silent, speechless world'. He longs to enter it, although he does not know what he will see there. A world of majestic dimensions it is, and beside it the old world of love and beauty seems to be small.

This period of doubt, uncertainty and fatigue is blown away on the wings of a storm. 'The Year's End' is the poem of a

vast, shattering storm that took place on the last day of the Bengali year 1305; it was symbolic. The poem itself is magnificent; the thunderous prelude of the storm, the roar and convulsion when it breaks out at last, its wild fury and exultation when it rages, and, in the last stanzas, its slow, gradual calming down, are described so well that the poem itself seems to be the storm. In gladsome and fervid words the poet welcomes the new and vast life of mystery which the storm heralds: 'Come, O new life, come, spread your wings across the sky and obliterate everything under your massed shadows. Let the lightning convey your movements, let the storm bursting out through a thousand rents in the sky sing your music, let the silent, majestic, dark of the night repose with your calm. Wild, cruel, confident and uncontrollable you are, and you have burst before my vision as the fruit bursts from the blossom destroying and scattering all its withered petals. I salute you, you hero and warrior: I gaze at the banner flying on your chariot, bright as the sun, although I cannot read what is written there.'<sup>1</sup>

The destruction is thus complete; it is also the beginning of a different life. The storm destroys but it creates too. Life must begin anew, but how can it do so if it is held back by ties of the past? 'I saw in the storm', says the poet, 'the message of the god of ruin. The decaying, the old must perish, that was what the storm said as it swept away and scattered the dead dry leaves of the last year. The words were of the god who is always new: he sent the storm, his angel, to proclaim them and annihilate all that bound me to the past. When it was calm at last, I told myself: Where is the peace of soul after all these years of routine and work? One shrinks from pulling down the old house with one's own hands even when it is tottering and must be destroyed; one has an affection for it. The storm however convulsed my soul to its roots, and I realised that I must come out of my old shell.'<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere the poet says in this connection: ... It was thus that the need to integrate *dharma* with my life became overwhelming. As I felt this more and more, my life could not pursue its old, even

<sup>1</sup> Free rendering by the present author from 'Barshafesh'.

<sup>2</sup> From a letter quoted in 'Granthaparichay', *Rabindra-Rachanāvali*, vol. 7, Vivabhārati.



course any more; the cleavage between my old life and the life that I could see was coming grew wider and wider. Gone was the assurance, the sweetness, of an ordered existence; a vast and terrific force appeared and tore it to pieces. From now on there was to be only the pain and agony of battle and division, and in the poem, 'The End of the Year', I described this.<sup>1</sup>

Of the silent, brooding, speechless world, the vision of which thus arrives tempestuously, the poet has another vision yet, but this time of a different kind. In the immense and dark silence of the 'Night', throbbing with mysterious signs and portents, the poet sees a symbol of it. Night holds her silent court; the stars, lost and wrapped in contemplation, are the courtiers. To their voiceless singing he will give voice and music; he will be the poet of the deathless sages whose dreams of pity and suffering fill the night. The poem in which he unfolds this majestic vision is indeed a great and powerful one.

*Kṣhāṇikā* (The Flitting One, 1900), the poet's next volume of poems, glides on freakishly in between *Kalpanā* and *Naivedya*, which are akin in content and spirit. It is a collection of light-hearted fugitive poems in which the poet pokes fun at everything from which he has suffered and must suffer yet, at the austere and contemplative life that has been looming before him. 'I won't be a monk—not I, no, unless there's a nun too for company', he says in a serio-comic mood.

But the light-heartedness, however genuine and enjoyable, has serious content, for it hides the deep pain he feels at parting from the love and loveliness of the life he has known so long. Behind the mocking, ironical smile of the poems there is always a tear; the pain is so intense that sometimes the poet cannot hide it.

When one has to face a crucial choice in life's parting of ways, between an easy life of pleasure and love and one of strenuous duty and thought, whose demands are alluring and frightening at the same time, one is likely to try to evade it for a time and to want to live on as before. But this is hardly possible if the pull of the new life is urgent and insistent. True, the separation from the past costs bitter pang, but finally it is the future and its stark, austere message that captures the poet. In the meantime, however, for a little while only, he

<sup>1</sup> From a letter quoted in 'Granthaparichay', *ibid.*

chooses to be carefree and gay, and at times perhaps even somewhat frivolous.

In *Kanikā* we have already noticed a strange combination of wit and wisdom with trivial words and rhymes. It recurs in *Kshanikā*, with a deeper integration. These poems have a gliding, glancing, magical lilt that we never saw in the Bengali lyric before, and the poet seems to have got rid of all serious pre-occupations. But the mask of frivolity drops off occasionally, and we see from what deep springs of pain the apparently trivial moods well up. And the moods themselves become increasingly deeper in the middle and final sections of the book: the fight between the past and the future comes out in all its agony without any disguise. The future is unknown, lonely. Perhaps the poet should not have ventured out in his boat at all; the seas are uncharted, and he is getting on in years. But, 'my foolish boat, nothing can stop it, and there it goes, floating away in the sea with me in it. I had always known it was a doomed boat.'

So the poet prepares himself for the last adventure, desolate and companionless, the issue unknown. But no shirking there can be; the new life must be faced, must be lived. Youth, with its dreams of love and beauty and delight, seems far away, lost for ever. But is it really lost? Will it return some day? The poet does not know.

A word on the successful and significant experiment on the technical side of Bengali versification that Tagore effected in *Kshanikā* will not perhaps be out of place here. As in the matter of theme or content, so in that of technique, too, his main urge was ever for freedom, the unloosing of all bonds that seemed to him to cramp human life and its countlessly varied manifestations. His emphasis was ever on *prāna*, life's vital force, its energy and vigour expressed in abundance and spontaneity.

We have noticed that he had already made certain remarkable experiments by which he had released a great deal of the hidden, and yet undiscovered, energies of the traditional Bengali *payār*. Now he went a step further. He discovered that the Bengali doggerel verses of folk literature came nearest to the speech-rhythm of the people, since in these verses the closed syllable not only determined the sound-structure but also released

the inherent potentialities of the vowels and the consonants. He discovered, too, that the Bengali folk meters were characterised by a great vitality and spontaneity, and that they could absorb with meaningful ease all sorts of foreign words and phrases, a quality that was very ably exploited by two of his predecessors, Bharatchandra Ray and Isvarchandra Gupta. In *Kshanikā* Tagore sought to make, for the first time, full use of these discoveries, and this he did so very successfully! From now on, he is never tired of making new and fresh experiments with Bengali folk-meters and the rhythm of the Bengali speech of daily life. Indirectly, these attempts helped him enlarge the horizon of his poetic subjects so as to include everything, from the lowliest and the greatest to the most subtle and the most sublime, from the gayest and the most frivolous to the heaviest and the most serious. Much of the poetic excellence of the *Kshanikā* poems is contributed by these discoveries and experiments.

## 4

Poetry and music were undoubtedly his first and his oldest love, with drama as a close second. During the phase under review, if he composed and published nearly a dozen volumes of verse, large and small, he also wrote and published three serious major dramas and at least about half-a-dozen humorous and satirical plays, besides a number of short stories, essays, a brilliant diary of life and letters and a series of interesting letters written mostly to his niece, Indira, to which a reference has already been made. Quality apart, the yield is enormous, the harvest, over flowing and abundant. Besides, during this phase of life, he engaged himself in serious editorial work, editing more than one serious periodical, and filling their pages with his own writings or with those of others rewritten or revised by himself. The amount of sheer physical energy involved in this business of writing is by itself amazing, nothing to speak of the intellectual vigour and discipline, the infinite patience and fortitude and the vast sweep of life that went into the process. Here is a measure of greatness that would characterise the rest of his life.



The first of the three serious dramas of this phase is *Rājā O Rānī* (The King and the Queen, 1889). Written in blank verse, more or less on the Shakespearean model, with plenty of action and intrigue, and an unnecessary sub-plot, it is as quasi-historical in theme as *Visarjan* (The Sacrifice, 1890) and *Mālinī* (1896).<sup>1</sup> *Rājā O Rānī* is separated by only a few months from *Māyā Khelā* (The Play of *Māyā*, 1888) of the earlier phase, and has therefore much the same aspects, the same excessive sentimentality and feeble lyricism, the same weak-kneed dramatic conflict and catastrophe, although its plot is of a different kind altogether. There are dramatic possibilities in *Rājā O Rānī*, which, however, the poet fails to exploit, and everything disappears in a haze of sentimentalism. But there are one or two redeeming features as well. Its plot has substance, and, though it has many loose ends, it is a distinct advance on the vague tenuity of the earlier plays. There is a noticeable skill in the management of the situations, an increased clarity in the handling of human relations, a firmer grasp of character. But the poet's imagination is still warped up in the rosy mists of a too facile emotionalism, a cheap dreaminess which isolates it from the true source of inspiration and power: the real world.

The dramatic conflict in the play is between the passionate and infatuated love of a king, Vikram, who is absolutely unmindful of his duties towards his people, and the humanism, the sense of duty of his conscientious queen, and, for that matter, between a vain and revengeful man and a kindly and proud woman. It ends in tragedy because, the poet argues, love, when passionate and infatuated, forgets its obligation to humanity and is bound to end in disaster. It is logic of this idea rather than action or psychology that seems to determine the structure of the play. Yet it will perhaps be a mistake to think that the poet imposes the idea on the structure. On the contrary, the idea is organic and intrinsic and stems out of the purely literary content as a flower does from its stalk.

But the cloying and enfeebling vagueness has worn off by the time the poet writes *Visarjan*, which he does only a few months later. Increasing contact with the real world gives his imagination a supple strength, a clarity, which we never found

<sup>1</sup>These three plays are available in their abridged English versions in *Sacrifice and other Plays*, Macmillan, 1917.

in his plays before. *Visarjan* is immeasurably richer than the previous play—in the depth and breadth of imagination, in architectural qualities, in knowledge and revelation of complex human relations, and, finally, in the chaste and disciplined restraint of emotion. The difference in quality between the two separated by so short a time is indeed very amazing. Written in blank verse but for the citizen's scenes, which are in prose, the arrangements of situations follow the same pattern as in *Rājā O Rānī*, but the treatment is much more skilful, the situations much more close-knit, the flow of action much more swift and smooth. The setting of *Visarjan* is also altogether different, and the nature and character of the conflict, on which the play is built, are much more intense, dramatic and complex. It is indeed this intensity and complexity that make *Visarjan* one of Tagore's most significant dramas. The conflict here is between the husband Govindamānikya, a conscientious and humane king, and the wife Guṇavati, a traditional queen, aligning herself with orthodoxy and conservatism; between love and duty and between duty and conscience in the characters of Jaysiṅha and Raghupati; between the temporal power of the king and the priestly authority of Jaysiṅha, between violence and non-violence, between the call of tradition and prescribed religion and that of humanity. Interpenetrating these conflicts is the dim but unflinching light of love and affection that bind Jaysiṅha, Aparṇā and Raghupati together, but cannot stem the surging tide of conflicts rushing towards an inevitable catastrophe. A blood-thirsty goddess appeases herself with the warm blood of innocent Jaysiṅha, and the curtain comes down. But love emerges triumphant and the god of humanity dethrones the blood-thirsty goddess.

If proof was ever needed as to on which side of the contemporary ideologies in conflict the poet's sympathies lay, *Visarjan* gave it eloquently and once for all. They were decidedly against hatred and violence, against social and religious bigotry, against superstition and obscuratism, and squarely and committedly on the side of love and humanity, of piety and non-violence, of reason and progress. Incidentally, *Visarjan* was to be the first indictment of animal sacrifice as sanctioned by Hinduism, and since the indictment took an aesthetic form it proved very effective. The emotional and formal vigour of the

drama came directly from the strength of conviction and the depth of feeling of its author.

*Mālinī* and *Visarjan* are closely akin in theme, inner substance and development of situations. The nature of the conflict is also the same: between the Brahmanical orthodoxy of Kshemaṅkar and human pity and compassion as taught by the Buddha; between obedience to scriptural law of Kshemaṅkar and Supriya and personal religion of choice of Mālinī; between conscience and religion; between love and duty and love and friendship, between country and religion. Also, Raghupati, Jaysinha and Aparṇā of *Visarjan* and Kshemaṅkar, Supriya and Mālinī of *Mālinī* are, respectively, almost identical characters. But the plot of *Mālinī* is simpler, the situations clearer and more straightforward, and the construction more compact. The import of the drama is as deep and serious as that of *Visarjan*, and here, too, though the end is tragic and takes the toll of an innocent life, love and humanity emerge triumphant through ruin and disaster. Leisurely, without any complicating distraction, events, moulded by what seems to be an ineluctable destiny, move forward to the inevitable end which seems to involve the whole world in ruins, very much like what one sees in a Greek tragedy. The restraint and reticence of the characters, the lucidity of the plot, the clarity of the structure, and the serious concentration of action and emotion without any concession to sentimentality add to the tragic impression of waste and disaster that prevades the last scenes of the drama. When the curtain drops, the question whether one's personal loyalty to love should prevail upon that to friendship, or whether one's love for religion or faith should give way to one's love for one's country or conscience remains suspended, unanswered, and this perhaps adds further to the sense of tragedy and heightens the total effect.

During this phase, Tagore wrote also a bunch of short reading dramas (1900) in verse: *Gāndhārīr Āvedan* (Gandhārī's Prayer), *Satī* (The Chaste Woman), *Narakhās* (In the Inferno), *Karṇa-Kuntī Samvād* (The Dialogue of Karṇa and Kuntī) and *Lakshmīr Parikshā* (The Test of Lakshmī). The *Mahābhārata* is the source of both *Gāndhārīr Āvedan* and *Karṇa-Kuntī Samvād*; the *Purāṇas* of *Narakhās*; but *Satī* is derived from an article on Marathi ballads published in the *Journal of*



the *National Indian Association*. *Lakshmī Parīkshā*, however, belongs to a category different from that of the other four. It has a light, glancing, subtle irony, and an unchecked flow of mischievous humour against the background, of which the grace and beauty of the figure of queen Kalyāṇī shines transparently.

Conflict of human values, which is Tagore's one of the few main preoccupations in this phase, is the theme of the other four verse dramas. In *Gāndhārīr Āvedan*, Gāndhārī's soul is torn by a conflict between love for her husband on the one hand and the elemental truths of life: right, honesty and justice. In *Karṇa-Kuntī Saṁvād*, Karṇa is torn between the love for and duty towards his foster mother and his friends and comrades on the one hand and the newly awakened love for his real mother. In *Narakhāṣ* the conflict is between Somaka's humanity on the one hand and the Kshatriya ideal of the warrior on the other; in *Satī* it is between the love and humanity of the mother and her obedience to social conventions. Of the four verse dramas, *Gāndhārīr Āvedan* and *Karṇa-Kuntī Saṁvād* have good dramatic qualities, the latter especially achieving a fine harmony of poetry and drama. The conflicts in each case are brought out in clear, well-defined outlines, which impart to the characters involved a three dimensional value with their specific lights and shades.

The ideology that inspired these verse dramas and the poems in *Kathā* and *Kāhinī* is that of humanism—the individualistic humanism of the nineteenth-century English liberal thought—which was the dominant ideology of the contemporary progressive Bengali and Indian élite. Abhorring whatever was irrational and obscurantist, it held up the creed of the supremacy of the individual, of the basic human values of truth and justice, and of the power of reason as against scriptural dogmas, social inhibitions and prejudices, and medieval feudal values. Tagore came into the inheritance of these values and sought to enrich them further. This he did splendidly in these four plays. In *Gāndhārīr Āvedan*, Gāndhārī's humanity is slighted by Duryodhan's crimes committed in the name of royal duty; in *Satī*, the mother's humanity is subdued and humiliated by blind obedience to social and superstitious conventions; in *Narakhāṣ*, the king Somaka's humanity is subdued by his obedience to the spurious ideal of a warrior; in *Karṇa-Kuntī Saṁvād*, Kuntī is

condemned because she had not done her duty to her son for fear of social disapproval; hence the mother's demand is rejected by the heroic ideal Karna. Everywhere, the true human ideal rises from its defeat and humiliation and asserts itself in inevitable triumph. And the opponents of this ideal are neither weak-voiced nor uncertain: Duryodhan, Bhānumati, etc., are strong and worthy advocates of their points of view, however wrong these points of view may be. This gives objectivity to the presentation and makes it really convincing.

Finally, the verse plays are valuable for the new interpretation they give to the classical myths, the new beauty and validity. Tagore brings all his contemporary awareness to the rehandling of those myths and thus gives them an immediate relevance. As we have seen, the poet imparts a new meaning to these old stories by instilling new and contemporary ideas into them.

Despite those high ideas and ideologies that inspired the intellectual élite, there were, as there are even now, many ugly and painful survivals of the past, poisoning and corrupting our individual and social life, cruel customs, absurd superstitions, self-deceptions, stupidities and inconsistencies. Any writer as sensitive as Tagore, even less, would react passionately against them. From *Mānasī* onwards Tagore, with all his love for his country and people, begins, nevertheless, to look upon the smug complacency of his countrymen with a bitterly critical eye, mercilessly exposing their hypocrisies in satirical or humorous poems, plays and playlets. Social and religious foibles were his main point of attack (*Chaitālī* has a bunch of such poems), and this attack he made with all the biting and bitter irony and sarcasm that he could command. But sometimes he just chose to laugh at them, more out of fun than anything else, which he thought was an antidote against our habitually grave and mirthless existence. A good many of them are just fine entertainment for children as well as for adults. But there are certain others that have an undertone of serious social and religious criticism directed against Hindu reaction and obscurantism that were raising heads at this time.

Of the more substantial social comedies that he wrote during the period under review, three must be mentioned: *Godāy Galad* (Wrong at the Start, 1892), *Vaikunṭher Khātā* (Vaiṣṇava's Manuscript, 1897) and *Chirakumār Sabhā* (The Bachelor's

Club, professional stage version, 1926). *Godāy Galad* is a comedy of errors lighted by polished, scintillating wit and enlivened by delicious satire on our society and religion. Its dialogue is sharp and vivacious and the language has a flavour that lingers on. *Vaikunther Khātā* introduces us to a kind, old simpleton whose sole obsession is his manuscript which he has been working upon, and which he insists on reading out to whomsoever he comes across; he proves himself to be an incorrigible bore and is avoided by everyone. *Chirakumār Sabhā* is a satire on those men who imagine they can go through life without women and as confirmed bachelors. The author creates for them situation after situation that lead to their complete discomfiture.

## 5

It was as it were a stroke of destiny that family duties and obligations took Tagore into the heart of rural and riverine eastern and northern Bengal, and that from about 1889 onwards, intermittently for years, he had to stay at Shelidah or Patisar, the headquarters of the Tagore estates, or to travel constantly by house-boat to different parts thereof. A new Tagore was born and nurtured here, one with a richer understanding of the common people, the peasants and the ordinary folk of the villages of Bengal, with a wider vision and imagination, and a deeper penetration into the mysteries of life and nature. The poems of the period under review bear unmistakable impress of this amazing enrichment, especially those of *Sonār Tarī*, *Chitrā* and *Chaitālī*. But nowhere is this impress so clear and transparent and so effective as in the long series of short stories that the poet wrote during this period; indeed all his characteristic and significant short stories belong to this period. And it is no overstatement to say that the genre of the short story in Bengali literature owes its origin and development to these short stories of Tagore. Poems apart, these stories are the most significant creative works of this phase of his life.

The long series of letters that Tagore wrote, during these years, from his rural abodes, to his niece, Indirā, contains the genesis of many of these short stories. These letters reveal the



mood, the atmosphere and the environment in which the short stories were written. We have seen how he slashed with biting satire and relentless irony the social and religious follies, the orthodoxy and the obscurantism, the stupidity and the insincerity of our city-bred, so-called educated and sophisticated upper and middle-class gentry; he had hardly any patience with them. Here, in these villages, there were nerve-racking poverty, squalor, ignorance, superstition, fatalistic acceptance of social wrongs and havoc caused by nature, small rivalries and jealousies and petty quarrels for an inch of land. Any person as sensitive by nature, as aristocratic by birth and upbringing as Tagore would have been repelled by all this. But not he, the humanist and the humanitarian. Besides, the vast expanse of the sky and the fields, the flowing water of the Padmā and its tributaries, the immensity of space and the eternalness of flux seem to have had a deep effect on him. Far from feeling any disgust or resentment, therefore, Tagore grew to love these poor unfortunate men and women and to have deep concern for their welfare. This love and concern gave him an understanding and an insight into their lives which were not altogether wanting in priceless human qualities. This gave him a new social consciousness too, inbibed not from books or from projected vision and imagination but acquired through actual social intercourse at personal level.

For the first time he gains an insight into the deplorable social and economic conditions of the Bengali peasant, the amelioration of which from now onwards becomes one of his main preoccupations. As a benevolent landlord he worries himself and tries to work out programmes for co-operative banks, cottage industries, improved agricultural methods, community development schemes, farming and marketing, etc. to impart to those dumb multitudes the dignity of human beings. As an artist, however, he was all the time taking a share in the simple, unhurried and uncrowded lives of these people, in their small joys and sorrows, loves and hatreds, feuds and jealousies, in their patience, in their mute courage and heroism, in their suffering and sacrifice, and in the burden of injustice and oppression they carried from day to day. Here was then an endless source of material for short stories which he thought he must exploit. But he had no model before him to follow,

no tradition to draw upon. So he ventured to lay the track himself.

The letters referred to are written in various moods and situations. Some of them are in a serious vein and raise fundamental problems of art and aesthetics, of life and letters, of society, religion and politics; there are others that rear up image after image of men and nature; still others there are that afford intimate glimpses of Bengal's rural life. Not meant for publication, the poet writes these letters without inhibition, without the conscious effort of an artist; yet many of them are literary games; their prose style and their form are models of the art of an accomplished letter-writer. And how simple, short and direct are the sketches drawn from life, how minute his observations on man and nature; everything, every object, inert or alive, men, women and children, every aspect or phenomenon are soaked in affection, wrapped in sympathy, bathed in love. A feeling of grateful acknowledgement, of inner sweetness and peace hangs over them all.

The themes of many of these short stories of the period owe their origin to some scene or situation or incident or character he had occasion to observe. He responds warmly to all that he observes, perchance a deep vibration is set on in his mind and imagination by a certain incident or something he observes, and his responses crystallise into stories. Not that a story has any correspondence with the actual fact observed; the latter only suggests the story, creates the specific mood and feeling and atmosphere. And what is significant in these short stories is not the situations, nor even the characters, though characters and temperaments are also brought out in the clearest of lines and contours, but this mood and feeling and atmosphere or a swift and sudden light that illumines an aspect of a character or a situation. Like the spirit of a lyric or the melody of a song, these evanescent moods, feelings, atmospheres and revelations vibrate in the air even after the story is over. The qualities of intense concentration, manifold and haunting suggestiveness, and the simplicity and reticence of expression that characterise a good lyric, are the characteristics of these stories also. Also, the supreme and all-absorbing harmony that one notices in the lyrics of the period, that exultation in all the minute details of daily life, that enchanting magic, that limitless love for man and

nature interpenetrating each other, are present in the short stories in all their dignity and grace.

'I think I shall be happy if I write stories', he writes in one of the letters, 'and make my readers happy too. And one of the pleasures of writing them is that what I shall write about will bear me company in all my vacant hours night and day, will keep me company in my lonely moments. When it rains and I have to keep in, they will cheer me up with memories of sunlight and the Padmā's glistening waters. This morning a bright and dark and passionate girl whom I shall call Giribālā is engaging my imagination.'<sup>1</sup> Here is the genesis of the story 'Cloud and Sunshine', which immortalises Giribālā as a shining example of Indian womanhood. In another letter he writes: 'One girl in particular attracts my attention. She must be about eleven or twelve, but since she is well-developed she might pass for fourteen or fifteen.' And then he goes on to describe her dark, handsome, simple but intelligent face, her half-boyish half-girlish manners, her curiosity and self-confidence. Already a mother with a baby in her arms, the girl stirs the imagination of the poet and sets it in motion. Thus are born Śubhā, the dumb girl, and the story of that name. Similarly, one evening, when the poet was about to open one of Kālidāsa's works to read, the village postmaster walked in. 'A live postmaster', he writes, 'must take precedence over a dead poet ... So I offered him a seat putting Kālidāsa aside. There is a sort of relationship between the postmaster and me. When the post-office was housed in our estate building, I used to meet him everyday. I wrote my story "The Postmaster", in this very room. And when the story was published in *Hita-cādi* he came to see me, somewhat shy and embarrassed.'<sup>2</sup>

Many of these stories are available in English translations, although very inadequate and unsatisfactory; however I cannot do better justice to them by providing still more inadequate summaries. All that I would like to emphasise is that these stories furnish an excellent study in human relations within the large frame of our rural life, and in certain rare cases of our city life as well, as in 'Kābuli-wālā'. Men and women of all

<sup>1</sup> Chhinnapatrāvali, Letter 123. Free rendering by the present author.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, Letter 62. Free rendering by the present author.



ages and of all types are placed in these stories in varied domestic and social situations of an almost static, inert society ridden with prejudice and superstition, hatred and jealousy, poverty and ignorance. Most of the stories are tragic, but the poet treats his children with deep understanding and feeling, infinite love, pity and sympathy, and manages his characters and situations with the skill of a master craftsman. Written in a narrative style, they have all a beginning, a middle and an ending, all closely conceived, all well-knit. The craft of short-story writing, as evolved in these stories, has not yet been surpassed in Bengali literature.

Stories of a different character were also written during this period, stories that have hardly any plot; they embody some difficult and unusual mood or atmosphere, some unusual and disturbing event or situation. The mood and atmosphere are the dominant features of such stories as 'The Hungry Stones', 'At Night' and 'The Skeleton'. There is always a supernatural element involved in such stories, but no supernatural character is introduced, as Coleridge does for instance. The author keeps scrupulously within the bounds of the real and the natural, and the supernatural is just shown to be a product and an emanation of this natural world, and there is always a close integration between the two. The power of transfiguration of a concrete object or situation into a high-pitched atmosphere and an intensely passionate mood is nowhere so eloquent as in the very well-known story 'The Hungry Stones'. No summary can give an idea of the horror and fascination of the tax-collector's weird experience night after night, nor of the astonishing richness and beauty of the language in which the story is told. The reticence, the ironical touches in the narrative make the moments of intense horror all the more shattering.

The most important thing to notice in these short stories is the deep current of humanity that flows underneath and imparts such truth and poetry to them. Yet they seldom go beyond the individual; their appeal is confined to sentiment and feeling, to impressing our sensibilities. There are, it is true, flaming protests against social repression, injustices and callousness, but they begin and end in the individual and do not lead to any criticism of existing conditions. For what we have his essays of the phase that would follow, but much of the knowledge and

consciousness that go into these essays was acquired during these years through the clearer process of art and direct experience.

## 6

Of prose writings of this phase, other than the short stories, letters and humorous and satirical dramas which I have already referred to, the most significant are his *Yurope-Yātrir Diary* (The Diary of a Visitor to Europe, 1891 and 1893), which he started writing sometime in August, 1890, and *Pañchabhūter Diary* (The Diary of the Five Elements, 1897). The European diary is written in racy and facile prose, in a lighter vein. It is marked by a fine humour and keen observation of the life and things around him that he observed during a voyage to and while in England. Incidental musings and phantasies lend further charm to the entries. Besides, they all have a remarkable pictorial quality and reflective flavour.

*Panchabhūter Diary* is of an altogether different character. It consists of a series of dialogues incorporating arguments on life and letters in general from different points of views, five in number, each voiced, in a humorous vein, by one of the five elements: earth, water, fire, air and ether, fire and water being feminine and the rest masculine, why, one does not know. The dialogues are full of wisdom lightened by sunny wit, the poet acting throughout as mediator and interpreter. Incidentally, here one finds the first beginnings of the poet's views on the problems of art and aesthetics.

## 7

Tagore is now forty, ready to cross over to the next phase of his life. He has spread out, in the meantime, to wider limits of life, has drawn in stronger sap through his roots and trunks, and has brought out mature and ripe fruits heavy with milk and honey, so much so that he can, as it were, bear no more. He has been out of the country twice, has several times roamed about and stayed in distant corners of India, and has lived in the very heart of rural Bengal, among her common people. He

has lived as a man among men, always exercising his senses, his mind and his imagination to their fullest capacity; he has enjoyed and suffered and has gained in strength and vitality, in vision and wisdom.

But deep in him is an introspective spirit, not a philosopher's mind, be it noted, but the high sensitivity of a poet given to the enjoyment of the mystery of life and nature. He is passionately in love with this world, this dusty and mud-laden earth and her children of clay, and with the beauty, the peace, the fury and the mystery of nature, his ever inseparable friend and companion. The external world with its myriad life, with its colours, sounds, sights, forms, shapes, etc. are many and varied, but he perceives, almost instinctively, their oneness within him. His introspective spirit makes him aware of an invisible tie that binds the living and the so-called non-living together into one life whom he chooses to call *Jivan-devatā*, the Lord or Deity of his life, who inspires and guides him through his life. This Deity dominates and suffuses his inner life and it is the echo of his footsteps that one hears in the more vital and significant poems of *Sonār Tarī* through to those of *Chaitālī*.

This certainly is mysticism, but a mysticism which is experienced through every fibre of his being. It is there already in his adolescence and early youth, when he writes *Prabhāt-Saṅgīt* and *Mānasī*, but, meanwhile, the awareness has deepened and gained in volume and strength, and has become the lord of his creative destiny. 'I am overwhelmed by this awareness of the baffling mystery within me', writes the poet in one of his letters (24 March, 1894), 'which I can neither understand nor control. I know not where it will take me or I it, I know not what I can do or cannot do. I cannot see, nor am I consulted about, what surges up in my heart, what flows in my veins, what stirs in my brain, and yet I move about and keep up the pretence that I am the master of my thoughts and deeds...' What we have here really is just a prose paraphrase of what one hears in many a poem of *Sonār Tarī* and *Chitrā*.

Towards the end of the phase, the poet is increasingly less and less interested in the sort of love and enjoyment of life and nature as he had been having all these years. He wants to probe

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography* by Krishna Kripalani, p. 162.



deeper into the mysteries of life, do bigger and more significant things, discover more and more of the spiritual values and aspirations of human life. He is slowly preparing for a change and a cross-over to the next phase of his life, not by throwing away the rich harvest he has gathered but through the very richness of life this harvest has endowed him with.

## 7. Fruits for Offering

1901-1913

IN the poems in *Kathā* (Ballads, 1900) and *Kāhinī* (Tales, 1900) and in a number of poems in *Chaitālī* (The Last Harvest, 1896) of the previous phase of his life, Tagore was trying to discover for himself the moral and spiritual values of our people as embodied in our history and tradition. It was a spiritual quest of a sort. The avowed aim was to interpret our history and tradition in the light of his humanist and universal orientation and in relation to his age, so as to be able to hold up a new set of values and a new ideology before his country and his people. At the same time there was deep down in him a dreamer given to occasional flights of fancy and imagination, as in the days of *Mānasī* (The Lady of the Mind, 1890) through to *Chitrā* (The Multi-Coloured, 1896). *Kalpanā* (Dreams 1900), which I have already referred to, records a number of such magnificent flights into the mysterious realms of nature, of myths and legends, and of history; they are of great poetic value, rich in inspiration, rich in their echoes from history and literature of bygone ages, and often pregnant with mature thoughts and reflections. The spiritual crisis he was approaching fast looms large indeed in the background of his thoughts. Yet, he wants to shut his eyes to it, and for a time, short though, he enjoys an interlude in *Kshanikā* (The Flitting One, 1900), and seeks to be gay and carefree; he wants to put off, as long as he can, the urge that has been inexorably asking him to humble and surrender himself, and to acknowledge in all humility his responsibilities to God and man. Love, whether for man, nature or God, must have its obligations and responsibilities; without them there can be no love. Therefore, such obligations and responsibilities will have to be shouldered, with courage and hope, with complete surrender to God, and in complete humility of spirit. The first he did in actual day-to-day life and in his essays, short stories and novels, and the second in his poems, dramas and songs, without any conflict

whatsoever between the two, rather one enriching and interpenetrating the other.

We shall take up the second first—poems, dramas and songs, one by one, to help us appreciate and understand the development and character of the poet's personality during this phase of life. Actually, however, this second and the first I am speaking of will develop, in all their aspects, integrally, organically, obeying the laws of biological growth and those of autonomous individual psyche, will, volition and social selection.

## 2

The title, *Naivedya* (Offering, 1901), of the first volume of poems of this phase of his life, and the fact that it was dedicated to the memory of his saintly father who was no more, are both significant. The *Naivedya* poems were mostly composed at the turn of this century. The early ones show the same patriotism, the same reverence for the ancient Indian tradition as we find in *Chaitāli*. The sonnets in *Naivedya* have, however, a greater depth because the poet's ideals were crystallising, and perhaps also because he came to possess more sincerity and strength of conviction.

Among the poems that echo contemporary events are three in which the poet prophetically denounces imperialist oppression and exploitations. He saw clearly, perhaps for the first time in Asia, the significance of the Boer War as a prelude to bigger and bloodier wars, and never in all his life did the poet abandon his anti-imperialist and anti-colonial stand. In dignified voice and in stately terms he set forth in fourteen pregnant lines of one of these poems the nature and character of the forces that were being let loose.

Many of the other poems contain prayers for the country, magnificent in their idealism and in their worship of the spirit; and the most notable of them is the famous one: 'Where the mind is without fear . . .' It is an economic or a political utopia that inspires the poet; he desires to see his country spiritually great, invested with a mobility of soul, with a perfect freedom of the spirit. Noble and dignified are these prayers and aspirations of the poet's soul. Patriotism in these poems merges with the



religion of the spirit as the purely patriotic conception of his country becomes progressively inadequate to give him that vision and inspiration of a larger life which he seeks. The earlier, purely patriotic poems lead naturally to the later ones, where the scope of patriotism is enlarged into an aspiration for a more enveloping spiritual life. This aspiration, nourished by the *Upanishads*, and by the Buddhist and classical Indian values as well as by the example of his father's contemplative life, is not hostile to the world of common clay and does not set itself apart from man's ordinary life. That was not Devendranath's ideal either. Ever from the days of his youth, the poet has felt the glory and greatness of man, and today, as he stands on the threshold of his spiritual life, he can declare: 'Deliverance is not for me in renunciation.' In this the poet is only following what an important segment of the total Indian ideal has always emphasised: God cannot be realised by means of knowledge alone; customs, rituals and even faith are sterile if they are not integrated with human life and activity. The divine spirit that the poet strives to know and experience is not apart from the human spirit but one with its highest glory and perfection. As early as October, 1891, he writes in a private letter, 'I count it enough to live and die as a man, loving and trusting the world, unable to look on it either as a delusion of the Creator or a snare of the Devil.' In another letter, dated 16 June, 1892, he says, '... nothing is more beautiful or great than to perform the ordinary duties of one's daily life simply and naturally.'<sup>1</sup> This is an attitude which is indeed basic for an understanding of the mind and personality of Tagore; his spiritual evolution rests on this real solid base. So the poet will not isolate his spiritual life from his day-to-day ordinary life; he will face God in his every contact and avocation.

These poems are really prayers, and the prayers could not have been so full-toned, so harmonious, if the poet had not sung them from self-realisation. The self-surrender, the adoration, is perfect. But this brings fresh duties and obligations, for God does not accept our surrender if we refuse or are too weak to bear his flag; the dedicated life is one so full of arduous responsibilities that the poet prays for strength to bear it.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted *ibid.*, p. 145.

Gradually, however, the burden, which had seemed so heavy, becomes light, as the sense of the realisation of God becomes easy, as the poet comes to feel that everything that had nourished his sensuous youth—all the joys and beauties and loves, the music and dance of the elements—now circle round his new perception. Indeed, this mystic perception has been possible in so full a measure only because his sensuous life has been so full. Not a day of the past has, therefore, been wasted, for everything has led up to and culminated in this ineffable and ever-abiding happiness. God seems to have accepted them all.

He feels in himself, now, the glory and radiance of the external life and is startled by it. The earth, its forests and sky, his body itself, have become the seat of God, and he feels that he is being transformed. This perception, overwhelming and heavy at first, becomes gradually easy, and the poet's soul is leaning towards Him.

In this absorption there is nowhere any sentimental or frenzied extravagance which has no object beyond itself. On the contrary, it is the truth, the whole truth, that the poet aspires after; truth with all its cruelty and harshness. If the sensuous delights that enraptured him in youth are no longer his, he has no regrets, for his ideal is the ideal of a complete humanity full of light and heroism, by virtue of which he can face and surmount all hurdles, failures and frustrations. This, too, is an ideal which he longs to establish in his country. He prays to God: 'Give me strength, strength to bear intense happiness and sorrow, strength to fulfil myself in action, strength to show generosity to the weak and not to bow to the arrogant, strength to hold my head high and keep my mind above the trivialities of daily life—I will bow my head at your feet, in fortitude and in faithfulness.' Such adoration has in it a splendid valiance and has nothing to do with any kind of sloppiness or morbidity. The poems in *Naivedya* give us indeed the impression of a character of rare power and majesty. What a fine ideal of humanity we get in these poems! That ideal, for which the poet had been seeking hither and thither in *Kāhinī* and elsewhere, is at last discovered in a splendid form in the poems of *Naivedya*.

This ideal is more nearly allied to that of the *Upanishads* than to the *Vaishnava* conception of *bhakti* or surrender of self to God in emotional devotion. Tagore's *bhakti*, surrender to

God, is big and alive with vast strength, wisdom and knowledge, a surrender that inspires fruitful and heroic action, a courage undaunted against all opposition and deprivation.

Tagore's wife died in 1902, when he was forty-one. He must have felt his bereavement very keenly, although it is only in one volume of poems that we find any mention of his loss: *Smaran* (In Memoriam, 1903). The poet was never in the habit of introducing personal sentiments and emotions in his poetry unless they had some universal bearing. The few short poems in *Smaran* are absolutely free from the least taint of sentimentalism. He had passed through arduous self-discipline just before; we have proof of it in *Naivedya*, in which we have poems which show his awareness of approaching death. So death, when it does arrive, does not surprise or overwhelm him, and when the first shock of sorrow is over it suddenly lights up love itself with a new beauty of which he is proud.

After his wife's death the poet had to take charge of his youngest daughter and son, not yet in their teens, and in this he found some distraction from personal sorrow. But his son was dying too. The poems in *Sifu* (The Child, 1903) were written to entertain the young daughter and the still younger sick child. These poems look upon the child as a fragment of universal life, the child's soul as an emanation of the divine. In every whim, in every simple question of the child, the poet sees a mysterious urge and presence and it is this that the poet explores in these poems. They are unique in the Bengali language, for, although there are poems in medieval *Vaishnava* literature which are full of filial emotion, they have no trace of the sense of profound mystery of these poems, which are not for children but about the child as an image of the wonderful and mysterious life.

*Kheyā* (The Crossing, 1906), written after a year's silence, raises a difficult question about the relation between the poet's personal life and his poetry: he warns us in a poem that we must not expect to find any at all. Yet, unless we know a little of the trend of his personal life at this time, we are unlikely fully to appreciate the significance of the poems in this volume.

India's national resurgence in the first years of this century has passed into history. The discontent, the fierce rebellious



spirit that had been long smouldering during a century of humiliation and subjection to an oppressive foreign rule, burst into a conflagration when Lord Curzon, against all warnings, divided Bengal (1905) into two halves in order to keep the province for ever disunited. The *Swadeśi* movement was not solely a political movement; it stirred up national consciousness. Also a many-sided cultural resurgence accompanied it, and Tagore was the priest and prophet of this wonderful national awakening. The nation sang his songs as it marched into the battle, and in innumerable essays and addresses the poet described and explained the ideals of national education, society, religion, politics, indeed the national spirit itself. Santiniketan was also rapidly developing into a small national institution. It is thus easy to see how the poet was trying to understand the spirit of the nation, its history and culture and how he came to take part in all the important social and political activities of his people.

While, however, his external life was so active, he suffered bereavement after bereavement. His wife's death in 1902 was followed by the death, six months later, of his daughter Renuka, and five years later, in 1907, of his son Samindranath. Meanwhile, one of the poet's dearest younger colleagues, a most sensitive mind and a promising poet, Satischandra Ray, died early in 1904, and the poet's father, who had nurtured the poet's soul through the formative years, passed out about a year later, in 1905. These great personal losses (the poet had suffered such losses earlier too, including the death of a dearest love, a most poignantly tragic one, and it was his lot to suffer more in later life) had *seemingly* no effect on his external life; his poetry hardly ever directly reflects the terrible pain, the deep anguish that any spirit as sensitive as Tagore's must have suffered at such partings and bereavements.

But did they have no impression on his inner spirit? They must have had; a process of transmutation of the substance of pain, grief and anguish, caused by the physical loss of the beloved ones, seems to register itself on the songs and lyrics of any period or phase that follows such losses, and the resultant effect became an integral part of the poet's being and becoming. The facile interpretation of romantic sublimation will be out of place in the context of a life that Tagore lived, especially

when it is remembered that, whatever activities he engaged himself in, he regarded them as a means of culturing his own self, that is, building up his personality as he understood it. To him the creation of art and poetry, thought and other activities were all but means to that end. The process of transmutation referred to above was thus the essential discipline of the senses and the mind, indeed of the total being, dictated and conditioned by the ideology of self-culture or *ātma-saṁskṛiti* that governed the poet's life. This rigorous discipline, practised for long and with the assiduousness of a researcher in a science laboratory, transmuted the substance of desire and passion, of pain and anguish, of grief and suffering into that of love and faith, of tenderness and harmony, of hope and gratitude. From Tagore's point of view, it was a process of unceasing enrichment of one's personality. Whether one agrees with him or not is another matter altogether.

True, later in life, when he was already past seventy, this discipline at times showed signs of cracking, if we are to judge by his creative works, particularly by a couple or two of his minor and weaker short stories, novels and dramas, and some of his paintings. This was but natural and can be explained, psychologically and historically. But, on the whole, his inner discipline never lost or loosened its grip on the vicissitudes of external life which underwent a transmutation in poise and balance and harmony, all distantly echoing, in so far as the poems in *Smaran*, *Śiśu* and *Kheyā* are concerned, an undercurrent of nostalgic pain and spiritual pang. Indeed, *Kheyā* and some poems in his later volumes register to some extent the transmuted substance of the series of sufferings referred to above.

In *Naivedya*, as we have seen, his self-surrender to God is unquestioned; but the God, to whom he thus surrenders his self, is yet shrouded in a mist of shadowy symbols and suggestions only. Death is perhaps bringing Him nearer. God and death are both mysteries and to the imaginative intellect they can be conveyed only by means of symbols. Most of the *Kheyā* poems are symbolical for this reason. They can be understood not cerebrally but emotionally, intuitively. These symbols are the body of a mystery which belongs to a region different from that of pure intellect, and it is the hidden implications, the

associations which are not always lucid, that are more significant than any direct statement.

We have spoken about the two main streams of inspiration in the *Naivedya* poems. The first we may call secular, patriotic, human. Indeed Tagore's leadership of the national movement was a concrete expression of his aspiration for seeking the nobility and heroism of spirit in his country, and basing the life of the nation on courage and justice, on humanism and truth. Such an ideal is more than patriotic; it is that of a humanity which is wanting in none of the highest values and glories of life. But, and this is the second stream, the poet is also drawn to the spiritual, contemplative side of the Indian tradition, the tradition of the sages and the seers who gave up their lives in the quest of the God in themselves. There are some poems in *Naivedya* which reflect the poet's kinship with these ancient sages; but, naturally, his expression remains completely aloof, detached from his day-to-day life in the world of actualities, however restless or absorbing that life might be. He is only one in a multitude in external life, he shares his life and his emotions with them all; but in his spiritual life he is alone, face to face with his soul and his God, in silence and in quietness. Of this life the poet tells us much more in *Kheyā* just as in his essays and addresses we learn about his other life.

His sensibility, we have seen, has been developing in a different direction. The spiritual, self-absorbing apprehensions that inspire the poems in *Naivedya* become real poetry in *Kheyā*, for the poems in *Naivedya* tend to have a moral and spiritual rather than a poetic ring. They do not have the lyrical and symbolical beauty of the poems of the later collection.

The melancholy note we find in *Kheyā* does not express any despair. The poet feels that all his busy days of action, their excitement and their success, have not brought him any nearer to his heart's desire. The shadows of evening are heavy and dark, yet where is the boat which will carry him to the shore of a different life, the life of thought and contemplation and realisation which he has been seeking? The poet is weary of waiting and watching; the shore of the life is empty and deserted, those who wanted to go have gone home, those who wanted to go to the other side of the river are there already,



but the poet has no home and no light, and the boat which is to take him to the other side is nowhere visible... This melancholy, this note of expectancy we notice in all the poems of *Kheyā* this waiting for the dawn of a life which will liberate him from the prison of action in which the poet has voluntarily immured himself. Once he used to think that he would conquer the world with the weapons he had forged in his workshop; he would forge a huge chain in which he thought he would bind the world, but now it is he who is bound, not the world. The unending road used to allure him once; he was tempted by the prospect of meeting the unexpected in the course of his wanderings; but now he is weary and wants to rest. He wants to strive no more, fight no more, desire no more; can he not go to 'the land where one can get everything', 'where there is no rushing and pushing about but only rest, rest and enjoy the bliss of contemplation'?

The transformation of attitude that we notice in *Kheyā* extends also to the form of his poetry. The stately metres and rhymes of his earlier poetry, as in *Sonār Tarī* and *Chitrā*, now give place to the lighter movement of songs, in which words and their arrangements play an important part and everything depends upon the tone and modulation of the voice articulating them. For, it is in those that the meaning lives, the word itself being bare and metric skill somewhat irrelevant.

In this world of songs the poet lives for many years, contentedly neglecting all his vast mastery of language, his shining intellect, the glow and power of his imagination. From now on the poet writes a language absolutely divested of ornament, the pure bare language in which the heart speaks out its ultimate feeling. It is thus that the poet offers his naked soul to God: in such an offering, such a sacrifice and remuneration, graces and ornaments would indeed be jarring.

The spiritual pilgrimage that begins in *Nāivedya* and *Kheyā*, whose directions and aspirations are revealed in *Gītāñjali* (Song-Offerings, 1910), reaches fulfilment in *Gītmālya* (The Garland of Songs, 1914). We shall find nature poems in *Gītāñjali*: but the main theme of its poetry is a painful and passionate striving to realise God, to lose all existence in this realisation, to surrender all one's being to it. The striving does not succeed in *Gītāñjali* where we never get the

assured ease, the joy of fulfilled endeavour, but only the agony of endless toil, a despairing wail, because the way is so long and so rugged.

How can the poet believe that he has attained to God until He is a part of all his life, until He is his companion in his material life? Tagore, the poet of love and beauty and joy, must find God in this life or he cannot find Him at all. The expectancy that we noticed in *Kheyā* is no longer merely pensive, the poet has become impatient in *Gītāñjali*. Setting out to find God everywhere, he has found Him nowhere yet; ever He is eluding his vision and grasp, and the search now seems to be so unprofitable, so barren!

The poet knows, however, that this pilgrimage must be a pilgrimage of sorrow, ordained by God himself; he knows that he must abandon all pride, and it is not easy to 'drown pride in tears'. Even work, work for his fellow men, he sees to be a part of the same striving, for he wants to see God where the peasant and the road-mender are toiling and suffering. One must not forget that even in his searching for and realisation of the Ultimate, Tagore never ceased to be a humanist; his God has indeed ever been the God-in-Man, the Universal self. In a large number of poems *Gītāñjali* tells us about this striving of the poet, yet unfulfilled, about the bitter anguish which failure brings, seldom of joy and peace. The poems which are directly addressed to God are poor poetry, for they are more theological than poetic.

Yet it was largely the *Gītāñjali* poems that carried the Western world by storm, leading eventually to the award of the Nobel prize, and brought him world-wide recognition as the most representative poet of the East of his time. The English *Gitanjali*, besides translations from *Gītāñjali* itself, includes poems from *Naivedya*, *Kheyā* and *Gītimālya*, but, of course, the number from the first is the largest. What did the West find in them that enchanted it so much? One is admittedly their unvarnished sincerity, the absolute naivete and simplicity with which they record certain day-to-day feelings of the poet, his spiritual yearnings, expressed with the least artistic trappings. But the more potent reason has to be sought elsewhere, it seems. The West, worn out for long by the storm and struggle for material power and worldly gain

that led eventually to the First World War, seems to have heard in the songs of *Gitanjali* a mystic call from afar for the rehabilitation of its lacerated soul, and found in them, for the time being at any rate, a haven of rest in the midst of a tossing sea of futile and endless toil. It seems to have rediscovered in *Gitanjali* its lost heritage of ancient Hebrew and Christian wisdom. The English *Gitanjali* was followed, somewhat later, by the publication of a few of his mystical and symbolical plays and more than one collection of speculative essays on his attitude to religion, philosophy, art and aesthetics. And the impression gained ground that Tagore was exclusively a mystic and a philosopher, the latest in the long line of Indian and Oriental mystics and philosophers. Western response did not take into account that Tagore was the least of a philosopher, that cold logical systems of thought were alien to his nature and upbringing, that all that he was doing was to put on record his individual responses to life's varied experiences. Mystic he certainly was, and I have sought to explain the nature of his mysticism, its origin and evolution. But when he came to write the poems and songs of *Naivedya*, *Kheyā* and *Gītāñjali*, we must not forget, he had already lived a strenuous life of twenty-five years, writing poetry out of varied experiences of life, fighting against political, economic and cultural exploitation of his country as well as against the ignorance, smug complacency and obscurantist social attitudes of his own countrymen. He had engaged himself in polemical warfare and in active protestant political movements. His mysticism had, therefore, a strong and straight backbone to support itself; it was not woolly in substance, nor washy in colour as mysticism often tends to be. Morning dews, soft graces of flowers, tender spiritual yearnings of love and faith are not all the stuff that his poetry is made of.

The Western spell lasted for a decade or so, and then it was broken, for well-known and understandable reasons which need not be recounted. The Western judgement of Tagore of the second decade of this century was made on wrong premises, and without the knowledge and experience of what went to the building up of a phase of life of the poet that is laid bare in the songs of *Gitanjali*. And since, so far as the West is concerned, Tagore's reputation is still almost insepar-



ably associated with the English *Gitanjali* (not many, even in knowledgeable circles, are aware of the encyclopaedic nature of his creative works; all those that have been translated in Western languages does not represent even one twentieth of the entire corpus of his writings), his greatness as a creative personality still remains relatively undiscovered, objectively unappreciated.

From the traditional and contemporary Indian point of view Tagore is great by any measure, but his greatness does not rest essentially on the songs and poems in *Gītāñjali*; it lies elsewhere. Indeed, from our point of view, the large majority of the poems and songs in *Gītāñjali* are 'poor', relatively speaking. One may ask, why? I will, therefore, discuss the question at some length.

The sensuous and human realisation of universal life, the realisation of God as a human lover are perhaps notions not as familiar in the contemporary Western world as in India. In fact, this kind of religious realisation has been a part of India's religious tradition. Here religious experience has never been a matter of dry theological or ethical cerebration but an integral part of a total experience of life. The seeker after God naturally seeks him in love, which seems to be life's most significant experience. There is nothing original at all in the perceptions and intuitions about which the poet sings in *Gītāñjali*, and it is this staleness of experience which takes from the value of most of the poems. But this is not true of all the poems.

When, however, a spiritual realisation is connected with an experience of nature, wonderful beauty and poetry result, as in some of the songs of this book, and an altogether new perception is born of this union between nature and human spirit. There are also some poems where the religious mood is present only as a dim effulgence, the real inspiration being nature and man. They contain beautiful evocations and rich feelings, and the religious background adds to this wealth by giving it a deeper significance. But such poems are few. The majority of the poem in *Gītāñjali* treat of traditional religious experience in traditional language, without subtlety or depth. But as songs they are beautiful, their melodies are enchanting and we remember them only as such.

Happily, the poet outgrows this obedience to tradition in *Gītīmālya* and *Gītālī* (Bunch of Songs, 1914), where religious experience is better integrated with his complex and subtle human sensibility. The poems in these two books, therefore, have originality and more penetrating timbre, especially when the poet gives them a background of natural beauty. We never had religious poetry of this type before. In Indian religious poetry nature is purely conventional. Certain stereotyped scenes are a constant background of the religious perceptions and experiences, which in their turn tend to be equally stereotyped. Nor was there any real connection between the experience itself and the natural background. But in some of the poems in *Gītāñjali*, *Gītīmālya* and *Gītālī*, there is a subtle and delicate interpenetration between the two which not only enriches both but also gives greater significance to the experience as a whole by broadening its range.

We need not concern ourselves with the large number of religious songs that the poet wrote, in his early days, for the Brāhmo prayer meetings. Their stuff is conventional and they do not spring from the poet's personal realisation. But the songs in *Gītāñjali*, *Gītīmālya* and *Gītālī* are articulations of the poet's creative spirit and are thus proper literature. To what extent do they belong to the tradition of our religious poetry? To be sure, we have a long tradition of this kind in our country, but the fundamental difference between Tagore and the old poets is clear, and this places the former in a class quite apart. The old poets know and sing of the spirit alone; but Tagore is a poet not only of the spirit but of the senses too, and also of nature and man, a poet who has known and sung all the loves and passions, sorrows and sufferings, delights and beauties that are to be met in the world. And a context like this lends a wide and varied range of colour to his religious experiences, a measureless meaning that we never find either in the old Indian poets or in the Hebrew poets with whom his European critics have compared him. For a similar reason we must set Tagore apart from the Vaishṇava poets, who found in the erotic mythology of Kṛishṇa and Rādhā such a rich symbol of devotion. The Vaishṇava's experience of his God is simple; he feels God as a concrete emotional figure, with ever the same shape and outline. But

the God that Tagore adores appears and disappears in his soul mysteriously. His shape is elusive, His outlines ever varying; the poet does not know in what secret heaven he lives. The Vaishṇava God, we must remember, belonged to a current religious convention and ideology. Tagore's religion, however, was personal, intensely human above all, and not social or conventional. So he had to create the God of his adoration. His religious experience is, therefore, never untroubled, however much he himself may have longed for ease and certitude. His melody is never sweet and simple, he says, for in his harp the strings are confused. Even this confusion is a spiritual experience, essentially human, but it is something that could never occur to the Vaishṇava sensibility. Superficially, it is true, Tagore and the devout Vaishṇava seem to have the same attitude to God as a lover: but the contents of the two attitudes are altogether different.

Religion in our country has always insisted on fulfilment, on the glory and joy of the union with the Ultimate, pure and absolute. *Gītāñjali*, where the struggle to achieve God and the pain of the separation from and loss of God are the dominant themes, naturally fails to appeal to the Indian mind. As one critic has pointed out, whatever the West may think of *Gītāñjali*, we in India can see its incompleteness, can see that it is too full of sorrow, of unrealised striving and agony to be really great poetry, as *Gītīmālya* is.

The first fourteen songs in *Gītāñjali* were written in an earlier period and do not reflect the dominant theme of this volume. It is the later poems that reveal this theme. The pain of separation from God that we saw in *Kheyā* now becomes an intense and intolerable anguish. The poet bursts out, unable to bear it any longer: 'Where is light, oh, where? The lamp is there, but where is the flame? Death was better than this.' The poet has waited and waited, in anguish and in sorrow; God still remains as far away as ever. On dark and cloudy days, on stormy nights, everywhere and always, the poet waits for his friend and lover, but in vain. How can he bear this neglect any more? He is tired of this quarrel with his beloved which never ends, for 'every day the debt is mounting'. Perhaps his self-surrender is not so complete as he believes, perhaps somewhere there is a flaw in his striving. Sometimes,



however, the poet feels that there is delight in this waiting itself, even though it may be in vain. The poet imagines, every moment, that God will not be long in coming now, he can even hear His footsteps; so he must wear new clothes and prepare himself to receive the Bridegroom. And, occasionally, the poet feels as if he has attained fulfilment. So intense is the joy of such moments that it transforms all the pain he has suffered into joy itself. But moments like these are rare. The poet has not yet met his God face to face but only seen Him darkly during sleep, in dream. The pain sears his soul.

The proud and upright soul that stood erect and prayed to God in *Naivedya* is here bowed down in surrender. But there is nothing feeble or abject in this. The poet does not run away from his God when He reveals Himself in terror; he listens to the music which He plays in thunder and storm and destruction, and gives back answering echoes from his soul. And, since his devotion had such a core of bitter strength, the poet can see this too: that God is not to be found by means of secluded asceticism or in temples and churches, but among the world's men and women in their ordinary lives, among peasants, among labourers in the streets, among the deprived and the downtrodden. The essential humanist in Tagore asserts itself again and again through all his spiritual experiences and realisations.

Evidently, however, all this is not enough. The poet suffers because he is not with his God, he feels His existence in his mind and spirit; but until God is a presence that illumines all the details of his life, until His presence fills his life with joy and beauty, how can there be peace, how can there be assurance? It is this all-enveloping peace and joy that the poet longs for, and longs in vain in *Gītāñjali*. Its music is incomplete because its realisation is incomplete. The phase that begins with *Naivedya* and *Kheyā* has not rounded off yet. And the poet will know no rest at all until he has explored and exhausted all that it contains, and then he will reach out for a yet newer phase.

The consummation is reached in *Gītīmālya* and *Gītālī*, where the new experience is celebrated in poems of extraordinary grace and beauty and freedom. They have above all a surpassing unity of inspiration and feeling. The poet's

God, aloof and sacred and remote in *Gītānjali*, is the poet's friend and comrade now. He does not know 'when the blossoms burst forth', 'I was inattentive'. But what a change! No more pain, no more sorrow, and body and soul dance in joyous ecstasy. Sky and earth, far and near, are lighted up with this magic, the heavens themselves bend down and whisper in the poet's ear. His body trembles with the music that floods the universe. His heart blossoms like a dew-laden flower; the river of life shatters all dams and flows out into eternity and infinity. Poem after poem is a hymn to the joy, the light and the song, with which the universe greets the poet's long awaited fulfilment, this long-delayed, long sought union with his God.

Whence this joy and this peace?

In March 1912, the poet had been preparing to go to Europe, but the voyage had to be abandoned because of his sudden illness. He went to Selaidah, the headquarters of his ancestral estates, to recuperate. There, away from noise and distraction, he 'talked with his soul in song', and it was in the course of this communion that the unknown revealed itself, the remote made itself near, so near that the poet 'could touch it even if he extended his hand a little'. 'Wonderful was his glance at me, wonderful was the breeze of his music, wonderful his secret coming in and going out'. Slowly, gradually, the poet's soul becomes one with God. But even in the midst of this peace and this delight the poet prays for suffering, for it is suffering alone that can bring increased awareness of God.

We shall find no theology, no intellectual probing, in the simple and joyous lyrics of *Gītīmālya*. So clear and deep is the realisation, so easy and effortless and enveloping, that the poet can sing in such a simple strain: 'You are beautiful, my evening guest, and I greet you. You smiled and the darkness in my soul became light; I greet you. I greet you in this lonely inn where I am resting after my work, in this evening heavy with the fragrance of flowers.'

All the 108 songs in *Gītāli* were written in forty-four days, between July and September, 1914. Here in these enchanting songs the realisation of God, with all its wonder and significance, is set in the frame of nature's beauty. The poet wants to forget the struggle and pain which preceded this fulfilment.

But, so intimate and so intense is his love that it becomes an intolerable ecstasy. There is no hesitation, no anguish in the voice in which the poet calls out to his God who is his lover, to wake up from His sleep in the 'solitary chamber of my heart'. The voice vibrates with fullness of love and trust: 'You are asleep and alone in the silent chamber of my heart. Wake up now, beloved, for I am waiting outside to join my hand with yours, to gaze with my eyes into yours. Our hearts will brim over with happiness and sweetness, and the darkness will tremble with the music of light. Wake up, oh, wake up, most dearly beloved!' Here is a love poem at its best, love for God or for the human beloved, no one cares to ask, so intensely sweet and poignant is the soul's yearning.

The poet can now say, because his love is so full: 'You have broken through all the barriers of darkness and appeared before me in light and shine, your trumpet blows in the street where sorrow once walked. Glory be to you, for death will be vanquished by you and the light that shines in you will burn in my soul also.' There is no more cause for fear, for even if the poet has to leave the shores of this world, his God will be where he will go. 'There he will know Him once more, on new shores, in the new light and the new darkness.'

Two significant points should be drawn attention to in connection with Tagore's attitude to and relationship with the Divine. First, what is easy to notice is that the core of the poet's faith was to perceive and realise his God, the Ultimate, within himself as an undefined affable reality. But what is not easy to see and apprehend is that with Tagore a deeper and more mystical truth was the realisation that the Divine, the Ultimate had no existence away and apart from the 'I' in the poet. Again and again he says that he needed God as much as God needed him, that the habitation of the Divine was the still centre of the being of man, that God's anxiety to realise Himself in the heart of one who loved Him knew no end. 'Oh, Lord of the three worlds, your love would have been nothing if I were not there', is the affirmation of many a devotional song of Tagore. Clearly, so far as this attitude is concerned, the poet is spiritually a very close kinsman of the Vaishnava *Sahajiyā* and the *Bāuls* (of no religious denomination) of medieval Bengal. There is no doubt that the simple



humanism of these medieval cults exercised a very deep influence on him, and transformed the relative abstractions of these cults into more concrete and human images and symbols.

Secondly, it will be noticed that his poems and songs on love and devotion (of *prema* and *pūjā*) are interchangeable. Indeed, his love poems and songs are also his devotional offerings and *vice versa*: almost invariably such expressions have a double meaning and application. The relationship with the Divine is tinged with the same colour, is robed with the same images and symbols, with the same similes and metaphors, and is given a habitation in the midst of the same associations and atmospheres that subsist between the lover and the beloved. Here, too, Tagore is spiritually very close to the medieval Vaishṇava poets and Bāul singers as with a very large segment of the Indian tradition. Tagore's God is a semi-anthropomorphic god who dwells in the very centre of his being, and whoever is his beloved, He or She too is the resident of the same centre, and more often than not they are interchangeable, if not identical altogether. As Tagore puts it, 'In India, the greater part of our literature is religious, because God with us is not a distant God. He belongs to our homes, as well as to our temples ... religious songs are our love songs, and our domestic occurrences ... are woven in our literature as a drama whose counterpart is the divine ...'.<sup>1</sup>

With this fulfilment in the Ultimate, the poet's life too reaches fulfilment. How full and ample his life has been! The restlessness of adolescence, the unsure passions and longings of first youth, the music of love and beauty in youth's full bloom, the approaching calm and renunciation at youth's end, and then, when life is ripe, this realisation of the purest and most joyous Ultimate. This is the cherished course of traditional Indian life, to reach and stay on in the formlessness after a life of ceaseless diving into the sea of form. The poet has lived each of these stages of the long journey to its full, and has tasted all that life has to offer. Is not this, then, his journey's end?

No, it seems not.

Indeed, the poet never desired that his journey should come

<sup>1</sup> *The Religion of Man*, Allen and Unwin, 1913, pp. 112-3.

to an end. He has ever been a wonderer, travelling from the known to the unknown region. Did he not, even in the peace and blessedness of *Gītimālya* and *Gītāli*, pray for suffering and disquiet, for without these there was no knowledge and light? The way that never ends has ever been his guide. And what after all is his God but a tramp himself, always on the road? The poet has known, too, that God does not live in temples and synagogues but in those places where men and women live and work, laugh and enjoy, suffer and die; he has known that this dusty earth is the only heaven that exists. The old and well-known earth and its helpless creatures take on a new aspect after this and the poet's old love for her is reawakened. Everything becomes new. Does his God will that he should return to the joys and the sorrows, to the thorns and the dust and the darkness, to the smiles and the tears of the world? If so, the poet will return there. And he does. He returns to this world of smiles and tears, of love and suffering, of strife and struggle. But, of course, the world is now different; so much has happened since he left all these for another world, a world where the self seeks to realise itself by its complete identification with the divinity, the world of no-art, no-poetry, no-form.

## 3

Late in this phase of life, in 1908, he wrote a short drama in prose, interspersed with songs, named *Śāradsav* (The Autumn Festival, 1908), which was intended for the boys and girls of his *āśrama* school at Santiniketan, inaugurated seven years earlier, on December 22, 1901. A year before, in 1907, he had lost his youngest son; and these *āśrama* boys and girls, in whose lives he had become deeply involved, helped him to a great extent to regain his love and zest for life and nature. It is a drama of feeling, of delightful responses to nature's countless bounties. Meant to be played in the open air, nature in this drama is an active, though invisible, participant, not just a background setting. The intense joy of living, the sheer zest for life, make it a delightful play suffused with the enjoyable innocence of children's life.

Yet it is not altogether free from the burden of an idea. It

could not be. For eight long years the poet had not written a drama. But all these years he had been in the active service of his muse of poetry and music; his inner life was increasingly being drawn closer towards a fuller realisation of self, and his external life was just suddenly being withdrawn from the vortex of contemporary social and political activities in which he had participated for about a decade. He was inevitably probing deeper into the unfathomable mysteries of life and was experiencing its glory in its countless manifestations. A churning of the ocean's depth was taking place; new ideas, new visions, new thoughts, new images and new symbols were slowly taking form. They called for a habitation of their own. Poems and songs were not enough for the purpose, since they could only express the deepest yearnings of the soul in a few lines written in a surcharged lyrical mood. But the ideas, images and symbols, born of the interaction of the inner and external life, yet not belonging to them, needed a receptacle in which they could crystallise. And such a receptacle the poet found in the so-called imagist or symbolical dramas, of which *Śārodatsav* was the earliest.

So long the poet has enjoyed nature which was the source of all happiness and delight, he has enjoyed love which was the source of all joy and passion. But, in the meantime, he has gone through fire and been made conscious of the duties, obligations and responsibilities that love and happiness entail. *Śārodatsav* is therefore a drama not of passionate joy and innocent delight alone; it also brings forth an idea of some significance. One enjoys love and joy and happiness in leisure, but this leisure has to be earned; it is not nature's gift, like her beauty. One earns this leisure through toil, through suffering which have to be faced and overcome if one is to have joy and love and happiness. From now on, this idea will be a recurrent one and will be concretised by him on many an occasion. Years later, in 1921, he would even recast *Śārodatsav* as *Rin'odh* (Repayment of Debt) in order to bring out the idea in clearer terms, but not with more artistic effect. Even in *Śārodatsav* the integration of the idea with the dramatic situations and characters seems to be somewhat forced and unhappy. But it is still enjoyable for its delightful evocations of nature's beauty, its simplicity of diction, and its lovely songs.



*Śārodatsav* was followed by another play, *Prāyaścitta* (Atonement, 1909), which is a play of action, not of feeling, and is altogether different from the former. Written in prose with a number of songs thrown in, it is built on the semi-historical theme of his earlier novel *Bau-Ṭhākurañir Hāt* (The Young Queen's Market, 1883), and is, therefore, full of action centering round intrigues, struggles and conflicting interests. But in the play itself the characters and situations have undergone such a sea-change as to have hardly anything in common with the original novel. In the play they are manipulated much more deftly and effectively, and Rāmchandra, the clownish and foolish king of Chandradvīp, is not quite the monster that he is in the novel. In the fifth scene of the last act he says, as he is about to marry again, that he cannot forget his first wife Bibhā whom he saw in a dream last night. This unexpected humanity of Rāmchandra deepens the tragedy of Bibhā's fate and makes the conclusion more poetic. But much more significant is the introduction of a new character, that of Dhanañjay Vairāgi, which is an original creation. He is the analogue of the imaginative Grandfather in *Śārodatsav*, and the precursor of actual Gandhi. The type recurs in every play henceforward, the cheerful and charming old man distributing happiness wherever he goes, a strong-souled opponent of injustice and tyranny, a fearless and passionate champion of truth. Alone and burdenless, he represents all humanity and carries all their burden. Bitterness and hatred melt away as he sings and laughs; abstract and difficult ideas trip gaily and lightly in the songs he sings. Like an open window he cleanses the atmosphere of all its sordidness and oppressiveness and lets in as through an open window the air of purity and truth. On his light wings he carries the action forward; and this is the technical justification of his existence in the play. A certain monotony results as he recurs in play after play, as he becomes, from now on, a fixture in Tagore's plays. Without his help the poet, it seems, cannot dramatise himself or his deepest thoughts.

But *Prāyaścitta* seems to have been just an interlude. The poet's inner life at this phase was preoccupied with much deeper ideas and thoughts, with his quest for the divine, the beyond and the distant. In drama he, therefore, comes back to the new form he seems to have developed in *Śārodatsav*, that

is, the imagist or symbolist or whatever we choose to call it, and writes three plays in quick succession, *Rājā* (The King,<sup>1</sup> 1910), *Dākghar* (The Post Office,<sup>2</sup> 1912) and *Achalāyatan* (The Immovable Castle, 1912). The spiritual yearnings and aspirations that inspire the poetry of this period naturally appear in these dramas too; the mystic desires and intuitions that irradiate the poems in *Kheyā*, *Gītāñjali* and *Gītīmālya* are dramatised in these three plays. Years later, in 1920, *Rājā* was recast and rewritten as *Arūpratan* (The Formless Gem) and, in 1918, *Achalāyatan* as *Guru* (The Preceptor).

In *Rājā*, Sudarśanā looks for the king in the world outside, among external objects. She believes that pride of intellect and of temporal power is the consummation of life. Her companion Surāṅgamā protests and says that we can know the Lord in the dark, inmost depths of the heart alone; if we do not meet and know Him there we can never find Him. We must not be deceived by false trappings. But Sudarśanā does not agree. Suvarna's false and external glitter infatuates her, and she submits to him as the true Lord. She is soon disillusioned, and there is a shattering convulsion of spirit as one false king follows another, all fighting one another for supremacy. After passing through a frightful ordeal of suffering Sudarśanā at last realises the truth that the Lord who dwells in no particular form or time or place can be realised everywhere and at all time, in our soul's deepest joy. This Lord who does not even once appear on the stage is the king and hero of this play. The dramatic conflict rests on the conflict of ideals, but there is also a scenic conflict: the queen living in the dark tower on the one side, and the city-crowd celebrating the festival of spring in a mad orgy on the other. It is in the dark loneliness of her high tower that she must first realise her King before she should have the privilege of realising Him in the light and colour of the world outside. Such significant scenic contrasts one would find in some other plays as well.

In *Śārodatsav*, for instance, Upānanda, silently engaged in his duty, keeps his lonely vigil while the grandfather, the *sannyāsi*-king, the usurer Lakshēśvar and the boys are merrily

<sup>1</sup>The King of the Dark Chamber, Macmillan, 1914.

<sup>2</sup>The Post Office, The Cuala Press, Dublin, 1914. Translated by Devabrata Mookerjee.

enjoying their Autumn festival in the open air. In *Dākghar* the sick and lonely boy Amal yearns for the distant and the beyond, while a panorama of the busy and feverish world outside passes by. In *Rakta-Karabī* (The Red Oleanders, 1926) too, there is a similar scenic contrast which heightens the effect of the drama. It has often been argued that such scenic contrasts introducing crowd or wayside scenes and characters are irrelevant, since they have no integral relation with the plot. Such criticism does not take into consideration the fact that in their introduction, Tagore was only employing a traditional dramatic technique used so effectively in our open air folk-theatre and that with an enlarged scope and vision. Secondly, and this is not difficult to imagine, Tagore's world of ideas, images and symbols was not anything that was away from and unconnected with the day-to-day world of facts; indeed, such ideas, images and symbols were born of the responses to the world of facts.

*Dākghar*, together with *Rājā*, is one of Tagore's most significant symbolical plays. Not very long ago, in a poem composed in 1904, Tagore had cried out: 'I am restless. I am athirst for far-away things. My soul goes out longing to touch the skirt of the dim distance. O Great Beyond, O the keen call of thy flute! I forget, I ever forget, that I have no wings to fly, that I am bound in this spot evermore ...'<sup>1</sup> *Dākghar* symbolises this passionate cry for the far-away, for the Great Beyond.

In a language of wonderful poignancy and grace Tagore bodies forth this longing in all its mystery and unsuspected depth. Amal, Sudhā, the Grandfather, the Mail-runner, the invisible King, all shine in the rare and dissolving light of this yearning. In the original version there was no song in the play, yet where shall we find another play whose soul itself is such a beautiful song? The play is indeed like a piece of music that vibrates in our consciousness long after it is silent, surcharging all our thoughts and emotions with a faint melody.

It is easy to find in this an idealised picture of the poet's own childhood, cramped and continued yet intensely sensitive and responsive. Shut up in a lonely room because of his sickness, the sensitive boy, Amal, passionately longs to know what is happening outside, but he is never allowed to go out. Ever

<sup>1</sup> *The Gardener*, Macmillan, 1913.



he is fettered by directives and prohibitions, is not allowed any free movement. Yet his sensitive soul sees, and takes part in, everything, and longs for a closer communion with the life outside his room. But there is the society in the person of the doctor, the family in the person of Madhav, to bar the passage, and the communion never comes about. Everyone, consciously or unconsciously, waits for the king's letter which never arrives though. Yet the professional but ringing cry of the curd-peddler, the postman and his ringing bell, the unseen king and his undelivered letter, all linger in our mind and bring nearer to our consciousness the yearning for the far-away and the Great Beyond.

*Achalāyatan* is not so characteristic of his so-called symbolical plays; it is rather a seriously satirical allegory aiming a frontal attack on our meaningless and antiquated socio-religious rites, beliefs and taboos, in a word, on our absurd Hindu orthodoxies. Pañchak is a young novice in an old religious establishment cut off from the rest of the world by a high surrounding wall; he is led by his orthodox and obscurantist elder brother Mahāpañchak. The young Pañchak is full of the joy of living and occasionally bursts out in songs. His inner curiosity often takes him out of the strong castle. This enables him to be friends with the peasants, the workers, the tribal people and the untouchables. Mahāpañchak and his elderly colleagues detest these tendencies in Pañchak, laughs at him, rebukes him and takes him to task, but cannot stop him. One day the *Guru*, the Great Teacher, arrives on the scene, and arrives with a retinue of the despised, the downcast, the untouchable and the unrecognised ones of society. Mahāpañchak and his senior colleagues, representative of orthodoxy and tradition, are taken by surprise. But Pañchak hails his arrival, and the *Āchārya* welcomes and blesses it. The walls of the seemingly impregnable citadel crumble down at last, and rebellion triumphs. But what would Mahāpañchak do now? Has he no part to play in the new order? Dādā Thākur, the grandfather in the play, assures us that the breaking up of the old order is only half the truth, the other half consists in the building up of the new order, in which Mahāpañchak's loyalty to tradition and orthodoxy has a role to play. Pañchak hails his elder brother and says: 'You and I together will open all the windows, north and south,

east and west.' And to this the poet adds his explanation: 'We can know ourselves, can realise our soul, only after we have pierced through the barriers of convention and sloth, only after we have overcome all material, mental, and spiritual opposition ... And when we first learn to see ourselves, we seem to be encountering an enemy, so utterly does this realisation shatter all that we had previously held to. We can accept it in our soul only after a preliminary fight with it.... This is the message I have tried to convey in *Achalāyatan*.<sup>1</sup>

No one would object to a 'message' in a work of art so long as it is worked out in a creative, that is, in an artistic manner. In *Achalāyatan*, however, the didactic element is so loud and insistent that it affects the workmanship; the social awareness, so real in the context of the times, is so powerful that it obtrudes on the unity of design of the play. To a certain extent this would also be true of one of his last plays, a purely musical one, *Chandālikā* (The Untouchable Girl, 1933), where, too, his main theme is the social curse of untouchability.

It will perhaps not be out of place to discuss here the nature and character of the conflict on which Tagore's so-called symbolical dramas are built. Negatively, they are not built on what is generally understood and called 'action' that inhibits intrigues, strifes, clashes of interests, etc. Tagore's conflicts are far more basic. First, the spirit of man by its very nature seeks to express and assert itself in joy and happiness, but, then, there is the world of actualities riddled with fear and doubt, with sorrow and suffering. There is thus a basic conflict between the two. Secondly, there is an essential but invisible bond between man and nature, since both emanate from the Universal Self, and nature through her seasonal changes and other manifestations is always trying to open up the doors and windows of the senses and sensibilities of man, is always trying to make them conscious of this essential bond. But, then, there is the human society with all its totems and taboos, prejudices and inhibitions, its greed and avarice, which tend to shut men out from their communion with life and nature. A conflict, therefore, becomes inevitable. It is on such conflicts that Tagore's symbolical dramas are based. This explains why there

<sup>1</sup> From a letter quoted in 'Granthaparichay', *Rabindra-Rachanāvali*, vol. II, Visvabhārati. Free rendering by the present author.

must be a young boy or girl caught up or imprisoned in the dark suffocating mesh of social realities, a worldly-wise or orthodox or traditional hero as a spokesman of tradition or social realities, and an old grandfather, a wise poet, a Bāul singer or a vagabond, or a *sannyāsī* to set tradition and social realities at naught and blow the air of joy and freedom, to which nature with her delightful bounties must make a contribution.

One more word and this is in respect of the stagecraft of these and other symbolical plays. I have already said that these plays were intended to be played in the open air or on open-air stages with the minimum of stage properties. No cut or painted scenes are allowed; if walls are necessary hanging curtains are enough, but not many of them, since an impression of space is an essential element in all the Tagore plays. Naturalistic setting, historical dress, etc. are not altogether ruled out, but are usually kept to the minimum, and then there are one or two suggestive or symbolical items in one unobtrusive corner to impart meaning, or slightly transform, the concessions made to naturalism. Rich, flashing dresses are avoided, and so are avoided very dazzling colours; the more dominant colours that Tagore would use are white, red ochre, yellow, red and blue, but always in subdued tints and tones. Lighting effects are made use of but not to produce a realistic illusion. Stages are generally rectangular and stage-compositions angular and rest on the simple laws of balance and proportion. In the formative stage of the Tagore theatre, the poet himself was his own producer, director, designer and dresser; later he was assisted by a gifted band of colleagues, among whom were such important persons as Abanindranath and Gaganendranath, Nandalal Bose and Surendranath Kar, and his daughter-in-law, Pratima Devi. However, the general conception and the rehearsals were always his own charge. It has been necessary to touch upon these details to make it clear that Tagore did not only create new dramatic forms but also the stage-craft best suited to the purpose. In both perhaps he was somewhat inspired by our rural and tribal forms and performances, but he was too civilised and sophisticated to accept their crudities, too sensitive to be bound down by their meaningless formalities. He therefore transformed and transmuted them in such a way as to



make them respond to the requirements of his expanding personality.

## 4

From drama to music is, in Tagore's case, a natural passage. In an earlier chapter I referred to his musical upbringing, the nature of his musical talents, his experimental attitude and his endeavour to free himself from traditional practices and textual injunctions. He approached music through 'feeling'. 'The main aim of music is to express feeling ...', the poet argued when he was barely twenty; 'the traditional classicists use words as mere pegs to their tunes, I want to use tunes as pegs to my words; they set words to bring out their tunes while I set tunes to bring out the inner meaning and significance of the words.' Later in life, in 1917, he confessed the weakness of his approach, yet the fact remains that till his last days he remained loyal to the basic import of his argument. This means, clearly and unequivocally, that music and poetry with him were integrally related, that words with all their meanings, nuances, shades and associations were as important as those of the melodies themselves; the two must subserve the same end which is to create the right mood, feeling and atmosphere, and the poetical moods and modes must be given the same importance as are given to the musical. To cite one instance, the traditional classicist would bend the words of a song and hence the rhyme to the requirements of *tāla* or time beat, since the poetry and rhythm are not his concern, but Tagore would never do such a thing since he was also a poet and would, therefore, rather create new *tālas* than disturb the rhythm of the words, and indeed he did create as many as six new *tālas* to serve that end. Besides he innovated a considerable number and variety of rhythms or *chhandas* to bring out the moods and feelings not only of those six new *tālas*, but also of such traditional ones as *Dādrā*, *Kārjā*, *Teodā*, *Kāhārbā*, *Rūpak*, etc.

The rhythm of the words in Tagore's music is, therefore, a very important element, which explains why correct and distinct articulation of words in their proper rhythm is so very important. The question of *laya* of classical tradition is also

similarly treated in Tagore's music, and here the use of *laya* is not to subserve rhythm but the feeling and meaning intended by the words. A *laya* in a religious song in *Dhrupad* style would therefore be different from the *laya* of the same song sung in *Kheyāl*. This basic difference in approach, therefore, marks the first departure or freedom of the Tagore music from the classical. Not that the Tagore music does not care for *tāla* and *laya* of the classical tradition, but this difference in approach makes all the difference of *tāla* and *laya* between Tagore's conception and that of the traditional classicist. Indeed, until 1900, Tagore, by and large, conformed to the *rāgas* and *rāginīs* and to the tunes of the classical Indian or provincial tradition, or to the tunes of Western tradition, as in a few songs in *Vālmiki-Pratibhā* (1881) and *Māyār Khelā* (1888), and composed his songs or set tunes to the songs of other composers (Vedic mantras, one or two of Vidyāpati's lyrics, the *Vande Mātaram* of Bankim-chandra, for instance) in the tradition of India's classical music as interpreted and fixed by the medieval schools. The innovations were mostly in the regions of *tālas* and rhythms, in the original interpretation of *layas*, and in respect of the role of words in melodies.

The songs he composed before 1881 are few in number, but between 1881, when at twenty he composed the songs (twenty-two in number, to nine of which he set the melodies at a later period) in *Bhānuśimha Thākurer Padāvalī* (1884), and 1900 he was very active as a composer. A large number of these songs are devotional, written to meet the demands of the religious congregation of his father, but quite a few are on love and patriotism. The songs conform mostly to the styles of *Dhrupad*, *Dhāmār* and *Tappā*, the melodies of a few of them being derived from the current *Hindusthānī* and *Karṇāṭī* music and of a very small number from the Bengali *Kīrtan* and *Bāul*. The introduction of the style and melodies of the itinerant Bāul singers of Bengal villages into the sphere of sophisticated literary songs proved to be of far-reaching significance in Tagore music. This is the beginning of that plumbing into the life and culture of our common folk and of seeking their affiliation to and integration with those of the sophisticated élite. With the passage of time he will intensify his efforts in this direction, and the degree of his success in this field is a

measure of the expansion of his personality.

The second or middle phase of Tagore as a composer of songs and music (roughly between 1900 and 1920) falls within the period under review, and may properly be said to mark the beginning of the creative phase of Tagore's genius as a composer. In a short but significant essay on 'Origin and Purpose of (our) Music', written early during this period, he points out that 'Indian musical tradition has got itself bogged down into the morass of heiratic texts and their rigid grammar; the dusty heap of the collection of melodies and the frames and moulds of *rāgas* and *rāginīs* are all that remain of this tradition. (Our) music is now only an idol of clay, without life, without its beat of the heart'.<sup>1</sup> Frankly and avowedly, the poet was now to draw our music out of this stagnant pool.

Thematically the songs of this period, too, relate to religious devotion, love, patriotism, seasons of nature, institutional ceremonies like marriage, agricultural rites, comics, etc. And they are composed in the *Hindusthānī Dhrupad*, *Dhāmār*, *Kheyāl* and *Tappā* styles, employing the more well-known *rāgas* and *rāginīs*. But, then, he does not forget the *deśī* or *deśajā* (indigenous) styles and melodies of our common folk, and employs the Bengali *Kirtan*, *Bāul* and *Bhāfiālī* in a good number of compositions and the *Pānjābī Bhajan* in at least a significant one. But the innovations he made during this period with a view to achieving more freedom and flexibility are more important than what he derived from tradition, classical or folk. First, he accepted the frame of the classical *rāgas* and *rāginīs* and their components, but trimmed all their unnecessary trappings, and divested them of all their rococo and florid ornamentations because he thought they came in the way of the meaning and significance of the words and their rhythm. Secondly, in the employment of melodies there is a definite departure from his earlier attempts. Most of the songs of *Gītāñjali*, *Gītīmālya* and *Gītālī* are set in melodies that are different in nature and character from those of his earlier religious songs where the words and rhythms were set in the fixed moulds of classical *rāgas* and *rāginīs*. Now he sees the inadequacy of this method for his purpose which was to bring out the

<sup>1</sup> Free rendering by the present author from *Sangīter Utpatti O Upayogitā*.



fullest significance of the mood and feeling of the words and rhythms of the song. He thus reverses the process and starts experimenting in bending the melodies to his purpose so that they come to subserve the demands of his moods and feelings. Thirdly, he discards the classical method of breaking and moulding the rhythm of a line in accordance with the demands of its melody and tries to maintain the same rhythm in both the line and the melody. And fourthly, which is very significant, he creates as many as six new *tālas* and a considerable number of rhythms, which I have already referred to, for the same purpose of giving utmost freedom to the poetry of his songs. Here, therefore, are the lines of basic experiments that he made during this period, which would yield their mature fruits in the next, roughly from 1921 to the last day of his life.

What the poet was trying to do was not anything unknown to the laws of biological evolution or to the history of Indian music. There is enough evidence to show that Indian classical music has always assimilated and integrated into itself new melodies, and also, through them, new *tālas*, *layas* and *chhandas* from folk and tribal or *désaja* (indigenous) traditions (*Baṅgāla*, *Multānī*, *Jaunpurī*, *Mālava*, *Saurāṭhī*, *Désa* or *Dési*, *Dési-Toḍī*, *Gauḍ*, *Gauḍ-Mallār*, *Surāt-Mallār*, to cite only a few instances) and even from what was once foreign (*Gurjarī*, *Turushka*, for instance). Then, there was also another tradition of our music, the tradition of *artha-saṅgīt*, as exemplified in *Kīrtan*, *Bhajan*, etc., which frankly admitted the validity of the mood and meaning of the words and rhythms of a composition, and recognised the obligation of the melody to heighten the mood and meaning, and *vice-versa*. Tagore was thus doing what had been done in the past until the days of Tansen in the sixteenth century. But, then, in the general atmosphere of ossification of the flowing tradition during the long centuries that followed and which Tagore inherited, he was conscious that what he was doing would be considered very bold, even revolutionary, since it was in total disregard of the prevailing ideas and practices. In 1917, therefore, he considered it necessary to explain himself in an essay called *Freedom of Music*, which created a great furore in the traditional music circles of Calcutta. Yet nobody cared to make a pause and realise that this urge for freedom in music was just another

aspect of a similar urge for freedom from the older form of action dramas to the new form of symbolical dramas, and that for the same reason, the expansion of his personality.

## 5

In stories and novels, however, we now find Tagore dealing with social and psychological realities, trying to fathom the nature of the tragic and frustrated love of the Bengali women of the contemporary middle class. The long story *Nashṭa Nīḍ* (The Broken Nest), which is altogether different from his earlier short stories, is really a short novel. The heroine of the story is the young wife, Chārulatā, of a busy journalist, Bhūpati, who takes the love, loyalty and affection of his wife for granted and has hardly any time to pay attention to her. Chārulatā is, therefore, obliged to spend most of her time with a younger cousin of her husband, Amal, who happens to be a lively and talented youth of some literary promise. Spurred on and guided by Amal, Chārulatā also starts writing, and as days roll on they begin to feed and inspire each other. What is inevitable in a situation like this comes about, and it is at this time that Amal goes to England for further studies, and Chārulatā, missing the intimate companionship that till then nourished her, feels forsaken and extremely disconsolate. Bhūpati, noticing his wife's languishment, assumes that this has been brought about by his failure to pay much attention to her. He tries to make it up, but, to his dismay and humiliation, discovers that the nest has already broken. With *Nashṭa Nīḍ* Tagore launches into writing what may be called problem stories and novels.

In his next novel, *Chokher Bāli* (The Eyesore, 1903), the theme is the same: the tragic and frustrated love of a woman in a joint family of the middle-class society of that time. But the setting is much more complex, with deeper and more subtle and complicated psychological situations, the characters more varied and the plot construction much more efficient and effective. The style is one of simple story-telling without any intrusion of poetry or intellectual disquisition. Indeed, the art of story-telling in a simple and straightforward manner seems to be a charm that characterises *Nashṭa Nīḍ*, *Chokher Bāli* and

*Naukādubi* (The Boat Wreck, 1906), and of these *Chokher Bāli* is certainly the most simple and effective. With this book and *Nashṭa Nid* Tagore lays the foundation of the modern Bengali novel.

Vinodinī, a twelve-year old girl of talent and some education, is married off by her father to a sickly and poor young man who dies not very long after the marriage, leaving Vinodinī a young widow without support and sympathy. Her life gets entangled with a family where an elderly widowed mother, Rajlakshmi, dotes on her only son, Mahendra, a lusty and vain young man, whose meek and shadowy wife, Āsā, is the object of the doting mother's jealousy. Revengefully the mother encourages Vinodinī to tempt Mahendra and thus betray his wife. Condemned perpetually by society to a life of privation, Vinodinī asserts her individual human right to love and happiness. Mahendra and Vinodinī get themselves caught in the snare of love, but in the inevitable process of sorrow and suffering that Āsā has to go through because of this, she is battered and moulded into a stern frame. The situation develops in such a manner that Vihārī, a friend of Mahendra, and Āsā also become a pawn in the game in which Vinodinī plays a part and draws out his individuality; the youth in Vihārī awakened by Vinodinī's magic wand troubles him and gives no rest. Two men and two women interact and clash with each other, which produces turmoil, disturbance, and endless complication. Of the four, Mahendra and Vinodinī are more complex; they have a more deep-rooted psychological conflict and are involved in situations that are as inextricable as they are intense. The Āsā-Vihārī tangle cuts across the Mahendra-Vinodinī tangle, and makes the latter even more complex. In the fire generated by these intense and complex situations surcharged with passion, Vinodinī all but burns herself and the Āsā-Mahendra edifice, but she retires from the fray the moment she comes to see through the vanity of Mahendra, his feebleness and his poverty of mind, and to dispise him.

The attention of the author is evidently directed to laying bare the psychology of the main characters in the story, and to the movement and disintegration of souls. Calmly and with astonishing reticence he unfolds the movement of the minds and the development of situations without the slightest acceleration.



of speed even at the high tides of passion, without the least embroidery, the least deviation from the straight course of the story. It is Vinodinī who is the central figure and focus of interest in the novel. It is she who from the first gives it liveliness and brilliance. She is not a debased creature; she does not consume others in the flame of her repressed desires; the flame only gives radiance to herself. Unsoiled, she walks through the dirty path of temptation, but never does she lose the white purity of her soul. She is the symbol of the stricken conscience of the contemporary middle-class Hindu society.

*Chokher Bālī* was followed two years later by *Naukāḍubi*, a frankly romantic novel of flabby structure and poor substance. It is a story of a series of errors, accidents and coincidences. Rameś and Kamalā are thrown together by an accident; Kamalā and Nalinākshya are re-united through a whole series of accidents. One fails to appreciate why it took three months before Rameś discovered that Kamalā was not his wife or why he did not take any steps to find out Kamalā's identity until his marriage with Hemnalini was settled. There are thus too many barriers to cross before one can enjoy the story or the wonderful grace and beauty of Kamalā, or Hemnalini's quiet and subtle sympathy and understanding and her immense reserves of strength. Incidentally, Hemnalini reappears in other names in Tagore's later and more mature novels; indeed, she is the forerunner of Sucharitā in *Gorā* (1910), Lāvanya in *Śeṣher Kavita* (The Last Poem, 1929) and Kumudini in *Yogāyog* (Cross-Currents, 1929), and is the first outline of Tagore's ideal of Indian womanhood.

The course of the story of *Naukāḍubi* is calm and equable, and there is seldom any intensity of passion or despair, not even in the situations of crisis; there is no intensity either of joy or of sorrow. This calm equableness, this quiet is due as much to the writer's disciplined senses and a disciplined mind as to his total view of life I have explained elsewhere. Passages in the novel narrating the quiet and dignified beauty and loveliness of nature respond to the spirit that permeates the narrative.

*Gorā*, his next novel, is a unique creation in Bengali, as for that matter in any Indian literature, for it is the only Indian novel to my knowledge that deals with the entire social consciousness and ideology of an age, with its social and political conflicts

and clashes, with its search for new ideals and values, with the passion, intellect and spirit of that dominant minority which was then in the van of social and political progress, the conscious middle class. Here is for the first time a profoundly serious attempt to find a synthesis between individual and social life. Its background is vast and its range equally so. A deep and passionate patriotism pervades the whole atmosphere of the novel. The men and women of this book are live persons with their distinct individuality but they are also more than just individual persons, for each of them have a larger significance connected with important social and national issues. It is indeed a modern novel with the dignity, majesty, range and immensity of an epic. What Tolstoy's *War and Peace* is to the Russians and their literature, Tagore's *Gorā* is to the Indians and their literature.

To be able to follow the narrative of *Gorā* and appreciate its varied characters and situations one should have an idea of its contemporary national background and the author's responses to it. Its primary afflatus came from the social and intellectual conflicts of that time in Bengal, conflicts to which a sharper and more immediate edge was given by the revolutionary political crisis at the beginning of the century. Political discontent had been smouldering in the country from the end of the last century, and there was increasingly bitter disillusionment with the British rule. This was especially keen among educated classes who felt conscious, with growing resentment, of the insolence, oppression and injustice, on which the British colonial rule was based. Nationalism as a sentiment grew and developed from this political discontent, but it was of course not confined to political agitation alone. On the cultural plane, dissatisfaction with the British rule expressed itself in a rejection of Western ideals and in the exploration of the national tradition and heritage. All over India, patriotic scholars and philosophers tried to find out the essential entity and unity of the Indian nation, a unity which, they thought, underlay the variety and conflict of ideals and religions that one finds in India's cultural history. Tagore was the tallest of these scholar-thinkers.

For himself Tagore discovered this essential unity in the ideal of renunciation of ancient India, in the life-long concentration on self-discipline and self-contemplation, in the deep and valid

wisdom that once inspired and gave vitality of social institutions now out of date, in short, in a re-interpretation of the whole of the ancient and medieval tradition. We have seen that this re-interpretation and recovery are the themes in *Kathā* and *Kāhinī* and in *Naivedya*. Earlier, in the pages of the *Bhāraṭī*, and now increasingly in those of the *Vaṅgadarśan*, of which he was the editor, he poured forth, month after month, the result of his studies which enabled him to reach a synthetic, all-embracing outlook on Hinduism, Hindu society and Indian nationalism. Again and again he insisted, with a growing clarity of vision, that life has to be viewed as an integrated whole and in its humanist orientation, and not in compartments or in terms of antiquated and obscurantist texts. The ideals, the findings and the arguments of his contemporary essays and addresses are repeated in *Gorā*; there, in the movement of the characters and situations, in the dialogues and discussions, they take a passionately eloquent shape and are enlivened by being embodied in personal lives.

It was during this phase of the poet's spiritual life, a phase of search, discovery and adjustment, that Bengal came to face a crisis that changed her history and determined her course for the subsequent years. On the plea of administrative convenience, Curzon, as I have already said, partitioned Bengal in two halves in 1905. Discontent, resentment and anger against oppression, smouldering for the last few decades, came to a head and the concentrated wrath of a nation fell on the government of the day. The Hindu middle class reacted fiercely to the onslaught, and Tagore became one of the strongest and staunchest of national fighters. But strangely enough his thoughts did not run on the fixed tracks of patriotism and political nationalism. Once again he found it necessary to re-examine the essential ideals. Patriotism as a sentiment was not enough, it must make itself felt in creative action, he argued, for the transformation of the national spirit for cultural and spiritual wholeness. Political struggles and political independence cannot be the ends by themselves, and without a continuous and active sense of its connection with the social and cultural issues of life, with the essential human values as a whole, they are bound to degenerate into vulgarity and sordidness. In essay after essay and address after address he warned his countrymen in these terms, but



eventually he could hardly stem the tide. The movement degenerated in subsequent stages, which revolted Tagore and one day he just drew away from it. He was getting increasingly dissatisfied with the political leadership for its narrowness, its moral and spiritual vulgarity, its inability to rise above personal recriminations and the clash of personal ideals. And actually the movement disintegrated. There was, in the later stages, no unified leadership but rival groups with rival creeds and policies. Terrorism spread among the youth and communal bitterness worsened the situation.

Tagore was profoundly shocked by all this. Once more a revision of values and ideals, of his social and political conceptions was but inevitable. Meanwhile, the split between the Left and the Right in the Indian National Congress was complete; terrorist activities were on the increase and ideological cohesion vanished altogether. Tagore kept away from this turmoil, and in the silence and solitude of Santiniketan he went on, among other things, with his work of revision and revaluation. One can trace this inner process in his essays written at this time, until the fighter of the *Svadēśī* days was completely transformed. His nostalgic veneration of an idealised ancient Indian life and tradition began to wear off; his idea of cultural nationalism dominated by Hindu ideology and his Indian patriotism with its social and geographical limitations began to take more and more a humanist and universal orientation. In *Gorā* we find him working through the whole gamut of our social and national life and experience during the last decade of the nineteenth and the first of the twentieth century. The characters of the novel reflect his many-sided intellectual and spiritual crisis after crisis as well as the development of his personality in all its phases and aspects. It was a bitter and difficult process, and the conclusions he reached were radical.

It was roughly about this time that he wrote a long poem, *Bhārata-Thirtha*, a few lines of which run as under:

Awake, my mind, gently awake  
in this holy land of pilgrimage  
on the shore of this vast humanity  
that is India.  
Here I stand with arms outstretched  
to hail man—divine in his own image—

and sing to his glory in notes glad and free ...  
 No one knows whence and at whose call  
 came pouring endless inundations of men  
 rushing madly along—to lose themselves in the sea:  
 Aryans and non-Aryans, Dravidians and Chinese  
 Scythians, Huns, Pathans and Mughals—  
 all are mixed, merged and lost in one body.  
 Now the door was opened to the West  
 and gifts in hand they beckon and they come—  
 they will give and take, meet and bring together  
 none shall be turned away  
 from the shore of this vast sea of humanity  
 that is India.<sup>1</sup>

This poem sums up the conclusion he reached, which is also the conclusion that Gorā, the hero of the novel, reached after having gone through the same gamut of experience as did his creator. In 1912, he wrote another poem on India—*Janaganamana Adhināyaka jaya he*—which is now our national anthem. His prayer to the Dispenser of India's destiny is to bring the hearts of all peoples into the harmony of one life. This is the new India that emerged before the vision of the poet after two decades of search and strife.

I feel I must at the same time emphasise that the value of *Gorā* as a piece of great literature does not depend on its social content alone. The intellectual arguments, the vast sweep of history, the brilliant social and political discussions that occupy page after page would hardly have any value if they did not reveal naturally the personalities of the characters by whom they are uttered. In a literary appreciation of the novel we are not even concerned with the validity of the arguments unless they reveal the characters who utter them. If *Gorā* is a great novel it is so because of its literary and artistic merit. The theories, the opinions and the discussions, with which the book is replete, do not exist by themselves but have deep emotional roots in the characters themselves, are a part of their spiritual organism. Consequently, there is perfect integration between intellect and spirit and passion on the one hand and between the characters and situations on the other. The spiritual and psychological development of Gorā, Sucharitā, Lalitā and Vinay follows a

<sup>1</sup> Rabindranath Tagore: *A Biography* by Krishna Kripalani, pp. 209-10.

rich, complex, and harmonious pattern in which their thoughts and ideas play a co-ordinated role. In their growth and change Tagore shows the concrete growth and change of human beings, which affect all the aspects of mind and character. Naturally, they play a large part in the arrangement and development of the plot, in the organisation of the situations. It is these that evoke new ideas and thoughts, as a part of the total response, and sometimes situations are devised and manipulated in such a way as to spotlight or elucidate some particular idea. Examples of this are numerous and there is no need to point them out. *Gorā* is a great novel, then, for its significant plot-structure, for its characterisation, for its spiritual richness and depth, for its majestic idealism, for its imaginative range, and for its firm and faithful realism. The social consciousness in *Gorā* gives the novel its basis in real, concrete human experience, and, in this indirect way, adds to its literary value.

## 6.

If his spiritual strife and quest and fulfilment are recorded in *Naivedya* through *Gītāli* and in *Śārodatsav* through to *Dākghar* and a few years later, in *Phālgunī* (The Spring, 1916), his intellectual struggle and quest for a deeper and more complete understanding of Indian life and culture of the past and the social, cultural and political problems of the present, as well as of human civilisation in general, are incorporated in the novels, particularly in *Gorā*, but more markedly in the large number of essays and addresses of the period under review.

Besides being a clear evidence of a powerful prose style characterised by a rich diction, subtle irony and epigram, sharp satire and genial humour, dramatic vigour, and controlled passion, these essays and addresses are spread over a wide range of topics and subjects and reveal social and historical awareness of a rare kind and an equally rare insight into the contemporary life and society. What is still more significant is that more often than not they transcend their topicality and contemporaneity and bring into sharp focus the essentially human and universal principles and the wider implications of the topic or subject dealt with.



Quite a few of his essays and addresses have made history, as, for example, *Svadēśi Samāj* (National Society), which stresses the need for creative and constructive nationalism and gives a complete scheme for the reorganisation of Indian society, 'Self Strength', 'Indian History,' 'Indian States', 'The King and the People', 'The Situation and its Solution', 'The Disease and its Cure', 'The Way and the Wherewithal', 'The Honest Way', 'East and West', 'My Vision of Indian History',<sup>1</sup> etc.

Chronologically set forth, these titles represent only a fraction of what he wrote, month after month, on Indian society, politics and history, in the pages of the new series of the *Vaṅgadarśan* and the *Bhāṇḍār*, which he used to edit, and also in the pages of the *Pravāṇ* and the *Bhārati*. Of direct participation in the socio-political activities, too, this period has a very crowded record. Already on the eve of the turn of this century he not only entered an indignant protest against the British policy of reaction and repression of the nation's leaders like Bal Gangadhar Tilak, but he actively joined the movement for his defence in court. In the same year he helped Sister Nivedita in organising relief for the plague victims of Calcutta. In 1901, he entered a vigorous protest against the insolence of British imperialism in South Africa; in 1903, he lent enthusiastic support to the movement for a Śivāji Festival, and two years later he threw himself into a fierce blaze of activity in the movement of protest against the Curzonian decision of dividing Bengal; his passionate patriotism found vent in a large number of national songs and addresses at mass meetings, in leading processions and in moving thousands of people by his magic words and enthralling voice. As the high priest of the *Svadēśi* movement he became the leading exponent of the new gospel of nationalism, and initiated the *Rākhibandhan* ceremony, symbolising the undying unity of divided Bengal. In 1906, he felt uneasy about the split in Bengal politics and pleaded for understanding; a year later he disapproved of the aggressive and

<sup>1</sup> One may find these and many other essays and addresses collected in the following publications: *Ātmalakṣī* (Self-Strength, 1905), *Bhāratavarsha* (India, 1906), *Rājā Prajā* (The King and his Subjects, 1908), *Samūha* (Collection, 1908), *Svadēśi* (My Country, 1908), *Samāj* (Our Society, 1908), and *Śikṣā* (Our Education, 1908). Not many of the essays collected in these volumes have been translated into English.

narrow nationalism that was fast overtaking our national movement. Increasing party squabbles, violent terroristic activities, communal disharmony, and disillusionment eventually led to his withdrawal from the movement. But he presided over the Bengal Provincial Conference at Pabna in 1908, and administered a stern rebuke to the political mendicancy of our leaders and their lack of self-reliance.

What these writings and activities meant for and contributed to the development and expansion of Tagore's personality has already been touched upon in the course of my comments on the novel *Gorā*, and need not, therefore, be repeated here. The vision of India that had emerged out of his long period of actual participation in political affairs and his repeated inner adjustment and evaluation is recorded, in creative terms, in many a prayer of *Naivedya* and in at least two poems referred to before—*Bhārata-Tirtha* and *Jana-gana-mana-Adhināyaka*. In intellectual terms they are crystallised in his famous essay, 'My Vision of Indian History', where he sees India as a meeting ground of diverse races, peoples and cultures, he sees India's tradition as one of unceasing attempts at integration and assimilation, he sees India's culture as a conscious process of forging unity in diversity.

But socio-political affairs of life and probings in history were not his only interests during this period. In 1901, he founded his *āśrama*-school at Santiniketan, to do which he was primarily inspired by his distasteful reactions to the lifeless system and environs that he had encountered as a boy and which he did not like his own offsprings to go through. In no time he found himself involved in the problems of education and started thinking and writing about them. For one thing, he was more than convinced that nature must play a dominant role in the development and upbringing of a child and that, while a simple, unostentatious, and disciplined life would help a child build his character, music and dance and drama and free, playful activities would equally develop his body, his senses and sensibilities and his imaginative faculties. For another, he was equally convinced that a child's intellectual and emotional training has to be imparted in his mother tongue in which alone he can properly articulate himself. Once he started giving concrete shape and form to his deeply felt ideas he found out that existing textbooks were not good enough; he, therefore, proceeded to write

himself text-books, framed model question papers, felt the necessity of introducing the direct method of teaching English, writing text-books to show how to do it, and undertook a study of such subjects as phonetics and verbs in the Bengali language. In the high tide of the *Svadesi* movement, which with Tagore was a constructive and creative movement, he took (1905) a leading part in the establishment of the National Council of Education, and, a year later, accepted the task of drawing up a comprehensive programme of work for the Council. It was at this time that he also wrote a series of articles on our educational problems. Much of the later experiments he made and innovations he introduced at his *āśrama*-school at Santiniketan date from this period.

Religion with him had always been a favourite subject of study from which he derived intellectual and spiritual sustenance. The period is marked by a remarkable series of sermons delivered at the Santiniketan *āśrama*-services and a series of essays on religion (*Brahma-mantra* and *Aupanishad Brahma* in 1901, *Dharma Artha* or Meaning of Religion in 1911), in the course of which he dwelt on the religious and spiritual vision and experience of the seers of the *Upanishads*, taking care to underline their deep humanist import. Here is indeed the beginning of that vision and thought which attained consummation years after in his Hibbert Lectures, published under the title, *The Religion of Man* (1931).

This is also the period when his thoughts and ideas on literature and literary criticism begin to crystallise. In 1906, he delivered, at the National Council of Education, a series of lectures on the scope and function of literature, and the year that followed saw the publication of a long series of essays on our ancient, mediæval and modern literatures and the literature of our rural folk. His *Sāhitya* (Literature, 1907) is a collection of essays on the scope, function and principles of literature; *Prāchīn Sāhitya* (Ancient Literature, 1907) contains a number of studies in criticism and appreciation of a few of our ancient classics, and *Ādhunik Sāhitya* (Contemporary Literature, 1907) is a collection of similar studies of modern literary works. I cannot here go into the question of Tagore's ideas on literary aesthetics which were evidently formative at this stage. Yet I must point out that these essays, besides being pieces of



literature by themselves because of their literary style, represent, to my knowledge, the first attempt made in Bengali, and for that matter, in Indian literature, to build up a set of standards for judging and appreciating a piece of literary work. The essays are illumined by his deep humanity, his equally deep insight into man and things, his knowledge and understanding of literature and civilisation, and his subtle taste and balanced judgment. But a more significant work is his *Lok-Sāhitya* (Folk Literature, 1907), which is a collection of essays and addresses on our folk songs, ballads and narrative poems, nursery rhymes, proverbs, etc. Apart from their literary value, they are significant, socially and historically, since they drew our attention for the first time to the rich wealth of this literature and the need to protect it from being swept away by the tide of time and through the neglect of the educated and sophisticated élite, to the need to resurrect it, preserve it and institute researches into it, all these for our own enrichment, in our own interest. These essays helped Tagore and his readers to affiliate themselves with the culture of our submerged people and the beauty and humanity of their lives. It was indeed a widening of our horizons, and an expansion of the poet's personality.

## 7

In 1911, Tagore completed his fiftieth year. It was time now for a look back and a summing up of what he had been doing for all these years, time for an introspective study of his own life. In 1908, he had written a short autobiographical sketch marked by a deep humility of spirit, for a compilation named *Vaṅgabhāshār Lekhak* (Writers in the Bengali Language). But now he starts writing his reminiscences, as an artist of his nature and inclination would do, from his childhood and boyhood days to the days of early youth. Meanwhile, his fiftieth birth anniversary was celebrated at Santiniketan with great solemnity, when, for the first time, an attempt was made at an interpretative estimate of his mind and personality by Ajit Kumar Chakravarti, a young intellectual and colleague of his. Somewhat later, the *Vaṅgiya Sāhitya Parishad* (Bengal Academy of Letters) in Calcutta gave him a public reception on the comple-

tion of his fifty years of life and in acknowledgment of the rich contribution he had already made to Bengali life and literature. This was followed by another autobiographical study in the form of an essay written in a mood of deep introspection, named *Ātma-Parichay* (Self-Introduction). *Jivansmriti* (My Reminiscences, 1912), to which I have referred many times before, reflects best this mood of humility and self-introspection. 'Life's memories are not life's history, but the original work of an artist', he says. Therefore, he is not so much interested in the facts of his life as in the impressions, the lights and shadows, left by them. In clear and rhythmically flowing language, lightened occasionally by a genial humour, he paints, in words soaked in water-colour, impressionistic sketch after sketch, revealing himself as he was in his childhood, boyhood and early youth. One wonders why he stopped there on the threshold of his manhood, why he did not bring it up-to-date, why he did not give us the benefit of seeing him through his eyes when his life was ripe with mellow fruitfulness.

Towards the end of 1913, on 13 November to be exact, came the news that the Nobel Prize and Medal for Literature had been awarded to him for his English *Gitanjali*. Somewhat later in the same year, the University of Calcutta honoured itself by conferring on him the honorary degree of Doctor of Literature.

The curtain was coming down on one of the richest acts—the third act of a rich drama—of the poet's life and career. A most fruitful phase of life was drawing to a close. But life's journey knows no end. And God willed that the poet must be a tramp, a way-farer like Him. In the last poem of *Gītāli*, also the last of this phase, the poet sings: 'If Thou wilt it so that I should come back I will; I will come back to this earth, to the shores of life that is full of sorrow and happiness, to the helpless creatures of this earth.'

But the earth is now a much bigger earth, the world a much bigger world stretching to the endless limits of vision and imagination, and teeming with the millions of men and women inhabiting that world. Waves from near and distant shores will now be breaking upon him in endless succession. Is the poet strong enough to face them and transmute their echoes into poetry and music, stories and dramas, ideas and actions, and finally into his personality?

The next phases of life will provide the answer.

## 8. The Nest and the Sky

1914—1925

IN A SIGNIFICANT fourteener, written on 31 December 1899, later included in *Naivedya* (Offering, 1901), and named 'Sunset of the Century' in its English version, Tagore records his deep pain and anguish of soul at the inhumanity of the Boer War in South Africa, which was started by a Western colonial and imperialist power, and to which its poets and intellectuals, too, lent their support. 'The last sun of the century sets amidst the blood-red clouds of the West and the whirlwinds of hatred. The naked passion of the self-love of nations, in its drunken delirium of greed, is dancing to the clash of steel and the howling verses of vengeance....' Their yelling poets have joined in the fearful holocaust, 'howling like a pack of quarrelling jackals on the burning ground.'<sup>1</sup> Almost a decade later, even at a time when in the midst of his mystic quest of the Ultimate and deeper mysteries of life, he heard the distant rumblings of an impending disaster and saw the dark and ominous clouds gathering in the Western sky only to burst forth a couple of years or so later in the First World War of 1914. 'I see the clouds gather in the sky of mankind; they thunder and they march in formation. Fiercely their hearts beat and they trample under foot all barriers. What drives these clouds, mass on mass, to clash and to thunder? I see the clouds gather in the sky of mankind!'<sup>2</sup> His words were indeed tragically prophetic!

Tagore's intellectual interest in the affairs of the world had its origin early in his life, and, from time to time, he had reacted to them passionately and intelligently. His growing conviction in the universality of life and the equally growing humanist outlook served him well when, from *Naivedya* onwards, he seems to have been developing an overall consciousness of a larger world comprising the whole of mankind, a world that transcends

<sup>1</sup> The Poet's own rendering.

<sup>2</sup> The Poet's own rendering.



the limits of geo-political and cultural boundaries. Despite his deep engrossment, during that period, with the life and affairs of his own people on the one hand and with his inner spirit on the other, this consciousness grew, urged by its own inner laws, and when his God willed that he should come back to the shores of human sorrow and suffering, happiness and joy, he discovered in amazement that a much bigger world and a much larger mankind than what he had known earlier had entered his consciousness. The development of this consciousness was much quickened by his visit to England and the United States in 1912, especially to England, where he met a good number of poets, writers and intellectuals with whom he exchanged thoughts and ideas. For the first time he seems to have discovered for himself the deeper sources which made Western life and culture great in so many respects. From now on the ideas and visions, the joys and sufferings, indeed the destiny of any section of mankind anywhere in the world became as much his personal concern as was the destiny of his own people. Deep echoes of all injustice, terror, oppression and suffering anywhere in the world would resound in his soul, and he would feel such pain and anguish as if they were his own.

But this does not mean that he was any the less acutely concerned about his own country and people. On the contrary, the wider became his contacts with the world and the deeper his sympathies, the more concerned did he feel for his own people and country. He would no more be involved in direct social and political strifes and struggles, it is true, but each moment of crisis in the nation, each case of injustice, of individual or collective suffering or of national humiliation would echo in his soul and he would respond and react with the whole strength of his personality. Henceforward his visits to, and sojourns in, distant lands would be frequent and he would be received and honoured in a way that would make royalties and heads of states jealous. Yet in the midst of all this he would deep within himself, feel home-sick all the time, wishing to be in his own country, among his own people—such were his emotional ties with them! More than once he confessed that his muse turned mute when he stayed long away from home; he could not sing or write anything significant, nothing to speak of poetry. Even if he could (on rare occasions though, as he did

during his Argentina visit in 1924), his mind turned to the trees, plants and flowers, the men and women and children of his own land, its rivers and fields, its clouds, rains and sky. In a letter to Victoria Ocampo (January, 1925), his kindly and loving hostess at Buenos Aires, Tagore wrote, somewhat apologetically it seems: 'You have often found me homesick; it was not so much for India, it was for that abiding reality in me in which I can have my inner freedom. My true home is there where from my surroundings call to me to bring out the best I have... My mind must have a nest to which the voice of the sky can descend freely... Whenever there is the least sign of the nest becoming a jealous rival of the sky, my mind, like a migrant bird, tries to take its flight to a distant shore...'

This nest is his own country and people, this sky, the world. It is in both the nest and the sky or the home and the world that we find Tagore absorbed during the phase under review.

## 2

*Balākā* (The Geese in Flight, 1916)<sup>1</sup> immediately follows *Gītāli* (A Bunch of Songs, 1914); a few poems in the former volume were indeed composed simultaneously with some of the songs in the latter. It may seem strange, for what has the poet of *Balākā* in common with the poet of the earlier volumes?

Normally, it is natural for an individual to rest in the mystic, non-empirical Ultimate when the life of actualities has nothing more to offer him, and poets should be no exceptions. We have instances in history, Eastern and Western, where poets and philosophers in such states of existence ceased to exercise their usual modes of communication. But something different seems to have happened in the life of Tagore. The irresistible pull of the Ultimate remained, but he chose to stage a comeback to the world of human sufferings, human joys and human

<sup>1</sup>Reference to *hamsa-balākā* in one of the significant poems in this volume makes it clear that Tagore was referring to *hamsas*, which in Indian art and literature have always meant geese, not cranes, nor swans. See Vogel, J. Ph., *The Geese in Indian Literature*, Kern Institute, Leiden, 1962, p. 74.

activities. In *Gītālī* the road that never ends once more invited him. In *Balākā* the poet came back to the road and to a renewed love of nature, came back to youth with renewed pride and strength.

In diction and versification, too, *Balākā* is totally different from the three immediately earlier books. The verse in *Balākā* sweeps and rushes with the impetuosity of youth. And the poet himself tells us that youth has come back to his old bones, spring has brought him a message from youth which he had forgotten so long. Indeed, technically speaking, verse-making in *Balākā* is informed with a vitality and a mastery of metre and rhythm that the poet could never excel, except, perhaps later, in a few pieces of *Patraput* (Plate of Leaves, 1936). The original impulse of making the verse free and flexible, while maintaining its essential inner rhythm, works itself out in full vigour in these poems which are the first examples of free and flexible verse in Bengali literature. In his next book, *Palātakā* (The Runaway, 1918), where the subject-matter is less poetic, the poet takes a further stride towards freeing the verse from the rhythm pattern of respectable speech and diction by bringing it closer to the breath-groups of spoken Bengali, a step that seems to have been somewhat conditioned by the meaning and the subject-matter. The process was pushed further, first in *Līpikā* (Sketches, 1922), but later, in *Parīśesh* (The End, 1932).

How utterly the phase of *Gītānjali*, *Gītimālya* and *Gītālī* has faded out from the poet's life can be seen more clearly in his next volume, *Palātakā*. All joy and sorrow, all feeling and desire had once been merged in one sweeping and engulfing realisation; but now it recedes, and as it does, what enchantment, what endless fascination the poet discovers in the most trivial incidents of our daily life! Returning to the earth once more, the poet cannot turn his eyes away from any object, so beautiful it seems. To everything he gives the same patient loving observation and sympathy. The transition to *Śīśu Bholānāth*, (The Child Forgetful, 1922), where the poet takes us to the beautiful and wonderful world in which the child lives, is clear. But we must not suppose that the poet is dissatisfied with his life of the spirit, and so left it for another. His sojourn there has left permanent traces on his sensibility; everything that the poet looks on now, everything that delights and attracts him is



tinged with the radiance of that mystic experience.

A significant event is the publication of the Bengali periodical, *Sabujpatra* (Green Leaf), in 1914. 'The object of the *Sabujpatra*', editor Pramatha Chaudhuri declared, was to 'give a jolt to the Bengali mind' and rouse it from its long torpor; 'to declare war on all forms of self-deception and weakness.' This language may be the editor's, but the inspiration was clearly Tagore's, for we have often heard the poet speak in this strain, and the first number of the magazine was heralded with a strident, defiant poem by him: '*Sabujer Abhijān*' (The Adventure of Youth). A strange poem to have been written by a man who had known the calm and peace of absorption in God for quite a space of time! There is nothing of peace or calm in this poem; it is a stormy paean to the wildness, the impetuous passion and freedom of youth. Neither this poem nor a similar one written two years later has much value as poetry, but they are significant as pointers.

But the lover of sensuous delights, the youthful spirit that years ago matured into the passionate joy of love and beauty, is not reinstated. Rather, it is a youth that is full of power, intellectual and spiritual, full of an energy gained in the contemplation of God and self, under a strict probation in the school of self-discipline. Tagore was an unflinching individualist all his life and refused to accept anything that did not pass a severe individual test, however widespread and consecrated by time its social sanction might be. His ideals, his religion, his theories of social progress, were all forged by himself, and were held by him with intense tenacity against heavy opposition, misunderstanding, and ridicule. He had often to fight alone against the whole country, as once he did during the *Swadesi* movement. For centuries in India slothfulness, inertia, poverty and superstition were being given sonorous and beautiful names and then supported by a farrago of sham arguments. What was happening at home seems to have once more made him acutely sensitive to this absurd attitude and he recoiled from it immediately. Against this mass infatuation with senility he vigorously posed youth with its rebellious and reckless freedom, its power and movement, as the rallying spirit. This he did not only in *Balākā* but in all that he wrote at this time, in stories, in novels, in essays. 'The popinjays that rule our society', he

declares in a fighting essay, 'cannot keep the youth under their thumb any more . . . May our youth be victorious; may it, with its thoughtlessness, its irresponsible indiscretion, smash up every obstacle in its path of triumph. Youth, gift of Rudra, the god that destroys, is no easy gift; it does not bring peace or comfort or rest. It rides on death's wings and spreads loss and sorrow but untold treasure is hidden in them, and in this death is immortal life.' But the poems of fury and denunciation and clamour are, as poetry, poor stuff. They have not enough art in them, they have not enough inner significance. The real poetry in *Balākā* we shall find elsewhere.

The poetry in *Balākā* is above all else the poetry of flux, of endless movement. Life's central fact, as the poet sees it, is motion. Even seemingly inert matter has a hidden centre of never-ceasing motion. To the poet's vision the firmly rooted tree longs to put on wings and fly away into the infinite sky, the mountain top longs to sail and vanish away like a cloud, the dead picture on the canvas, painted from moving life, returns to life. The universe is a universe of motion which is the only reality. Inert matter, since it is a part of a dynamic universe, is itself dynamic, and change is not a transformation of one form of inert matter into another but only a moment in the eternal cycle of motion which is life. To be sure, it may not be very original as a philosophical concept. But any discussion of the sources of the idea or of its validity would be profitless for our purpose, for surely we do not read *Balākā* in order to find there an explanation of the theory of perpetual change. In any case, this vision and reality of perpetual change fascinate the poet. He sees beautiful mysteries, possibilities of new experiences that he had never known before. When the poet emotionally apprehends an idea or truth, it embodies itself in images and symbols, and thus dry abstraction is transmuted into living beauty. These images and symbols are at times of inert objects, and at other times of moving objects.

'A Portrait' strikes the keynote of the volume; it is a fine poem, rich in music and majesty, rich in intellectual power. This portrait of a long lost dear which the poet comes upon, evokes images of a long submerged love, and the dead inert lines and paints, lights and shadows of the portrait, become endowed with life and movement, as everything else around is,

restless, throbbingly real and alive. Every atom of the universe is a piece of congealed motion, even a particle of dust, a blade of grass, and the love that lay congealed in the portrait becomes alive now in a moment. The poet may have forgotten that portrait, but does he not sometimes forget the flowers that bloom in the wayside, forget the stars that shine in the sky? They exist, they are alive, although the poet forgets them sometimes, and so does she. Her music, the poet says, 'branches in my songs: she is a poet in my poet's heart. She is not a portrait, not a mere portrait'. But this is just a bald statement of the central theme; the magic of the words and evocations, the richness of the idea and vision as concretised in moving images are far beyond me to communicate.

But the most evocative and artistic expression of the concept of life as perpetual change and ceaseless motion is to be found in the two pieces, 'The Restless' and the name-poem 'Balākā'. The river's dark ceaseless roll is eternal, without beginning or end, and this unending invisible swirl shakes the universe with its motion. The river is a goddess, renewing herself in fadeless youth, wantonly indifferent to joy and sorrow; she has no home, no possessions at all, no existence outside the eternal rush of its waters, tumid and destructive. Ever new, ever holy, she quickens death into life by her touch, for her flood lays waste the old and prepares the earth to receive the new. In a sublime crescendo the poet's vision now begins to transcend the sensuous moment, as his soul is merged with the soul of the river, as the poet's whole organism shakes and trembles with the very motion of the river's current, so long external to him. Then this 'girdle round the earth, swinging to the music of bells', this 'ceaseless and ineffectual tread of invisible feet' trouble him; in all his veins 'restless footsteps echo', and his blood 'dances with the roll of sea waves'. Is not the river like his own life? Has he not, too, like the river, been on an endless journey from life to life and world to world, and like the river that spends all its gains in its ever-moving current, has he, too, accumulated nothing but has exhausted all his wealth in gift after gift and song after song?

In the poem 'Balākā' we shall find an even more splendid vision. As the geese fly across the sky to unknown and far away lands, they seem to him to be a symbol of the restless, ever-un-



quenched longing of the universal life to fly away, to be lost in eternity, to seek for ever the shapes and forms that can never be found, to break all barriers and grow unchecked in infinite freedom. The poet was then living in a houseboat on the Jhelum at Srinagar. The lengthening shadows of the evening darkened the river and the hills and the pines at their feet. The silence and gathering darkness seemed to throb with unspoken words, unspoken desires and passions, and all the world seemed to share them. Suddenly this silence is rent asunder by the flutter of the birds' wings as they fly away across the sky into the limitless, invisible distance; and the sound sends a thrill into everything, into the pine forests, into the gloomy mountain tops, into the poet's soul also. At last a voice and symbol have been found for all the passions and all the desires that were unspoken so long, and the poet bursts into song. The mountain tops yearn to vanish away aimlessly like the cloud, the trees to put on birds' wings and sail away into the heights and depths of the sky. All things that exist murmur: 'Not here, not here, but somewhere else, in some other mode of being, there is fulfilment.' Even the blades of grass feel the agony of desire for this fulfilment and beat tremulous wings against the earth, which is their sky. Even the impalpable darkness is troubled and shaken as the stars quiver in the firmament. And what else is the poet's song but that of a bird ever on its wings in search of a fulfilment, a consummation that never arrives: the sound of its wings has ever the same meaning: 'not here, not here, but somewhere else'.

But if life is only a floating particle in the sea of universal motion, then some day it will surely lose its own entity and be swallowed up in the larger motion, which will be its annihilation. If nothing in the world ever stops, it follows that the poet's own life has no special privilege but will some day disappear beyond the barriers of his individual being. At first the poet feels no pain; he feels rather an exhilaration at the thought that life is a never-ending voyage from youth to youth, joy to joy, a joy that permeates the sun, the moon and the stars. Gradually, however, a shadow approaches. How can the poet be indifferent as he reflects that some day he will be no more in the world he loves so much? Is there somewhere a consolation, something that will redeem the loss? The poet feels that there must be some bond, nay, some affinity between life and death, a conti-

nuity in the experience of the two, that will lessen the pang when he passes from the one to the other. But where is this affinity, this continuity? This world and this life of the poet have become one, so many and deep are the ties that bind them; yet one day his voice will be silent here, his eyes will no more welcome and revel in its light, no more will its dawns speak their splendid and bright message to his soul, its nights will no more sing to him their inexhaustible, mysterious song. 'And an end will come to my last vision and my last message.'

There is much sorrow in this realisation, but perhaps some consolation too: if death was really a dark curtain that kept hidden all intimate experiences from view, if such passionate longing and such irrevocable parting had no link between them, then existence would be a monstrous cheat and life would wither in a moment like a cankered blossom. The First World War was raging at this time, and the whole continent of Europe was harried with death, devastation, and agony. Echoes reached India, but the poet was not down-hearted, because nothing could shake his faith in man's ultimate destiny. All the horrors, all the sufferings, the poet felt, could not be in vain: and indeed they served a deep purpose. Death was let loose in the world, death's agony was heavy on his heart. But death's shadow was life, he argued. 'Too long the world has been content with the miserable accretions of the past; they must be cleared away now and room made for a new and bright life. Death brings its fiery purification, sears up in it all the accumulated crimes and wrongs and injustices of centuries. How can God forgive the insult to Him that men has heaped up, before He has punished him? The poet, therefore, neither fears death nor submits to it, although its power is so huge to-day, it will become a shadow and a lie when life arrives again. Life in its progress has ever and again to face death's challenge, seeking to halt it and lay it low, but death always is beaten by life; always, after annihilating death, life fulfils itself in new and dynamic forms. 'Why are so many brave and lovely souls dying in battle as the stars die at dawn's approach, why is the earth being shaken and shattered to fragments, why is there all this incalculable woe and torment, if we cannot purchase heaven with it? The hideous night must be over, the day must shine again with the radiance of the gods.'

All that I am capable of attempting is to give an inadequate idea of a theme that inspires some of the magnificent poems in *Balākā*. Their dignified sound and rhythm, their rich images and visions, and their power and strength constitute a poetry that is simply untranslatable, uncommunicable, at any rate for me.

Some of the poems in *Balākā* are of frailer substance and texture. In them the poet does not explore any profound ideas and intuitions but simply records in imperishably beautiful verse certain sensuous and emotional impressions. Some of them take us back to the deep spiritual grace, peace and satisfaction of the days of *Gītimālya* and *Gītālī*; but in *Balākā*, the perception of the spirit reaches a yet higher level. For now it is not the poet alone who fulfils himself in God's realisation; God too is incomplete until he and the poet are one in being. Was not the lustre of the earth dim until the poet learnt to love it, was not the earth waiting for this love? Just so with God. There is now a new assurance, a new and easy self-confidence and freedom in these poems. Paradoxically it seems as if the poet is nearer to God than ever before, precisely because of the distance that separates them now. How fearful he had so long been lest he should by any chance displease his God, lest he should, unwittingly, cross His will in anything, and thus lose His love. No longer obsessed by fear, he is supremely free indeed; the more God neglects him and makes him suffer, the freer he feels; since in such freedom can he realise Him more intimately and surely than ever before. And while, therefore, God had been the giver and he the receiver, the roles are now reversed. God has given the poet the job of building up the paradise in which He will dwell; he alone, the poet proudly feels, gives to God instead of receiving from Him. But where will he build this paradise? No longer in a land which does not exist but in this very earth where we are born and where we live, love and suffer, work and die. 'Heaven is born in my Earth Mother's womb, and all the rejoicing'. Here is, indeed, a second farewell, this one from the heaven of myths and legends, from the God who is not Man himself.

And in *Palātakā*, he tells us about this heaven and man-made earth. They are written in unconventional but graceful and



harmonious metres, as in *Balākā*. But *Palātakā*'s metrical lines are of varying length, and all the sonorous splendour is shorn away; the words are the homeliest possible, simple without any vulgarity or coarseness. This bareness and familiarity shine with indescribable grace. Each of the poems tells a story. Poetry irradiates it in sudden and unexpected flashes, like darts of sunlight: an image, the turn of a phrase, sometimes even a word, open up limitless prospects of beauty. And the stories themselves are poetic, they modulate poetically. Full of the poet's ripe experience of life, they have also profundity of substance. And everywhere there is the reflection of the poet's love for and adoration of nature.

We see all this in the very first poem which tells the homely story of a pet deer and a puppy that used to play in the poet's garden. One day in spring, as the flowers wake up and the sky trembles in the southern breeze like a lover when he reads the letter of his beloved, the deer too feels a new life surging in his veins, a strange fascination calls to him, and he runs away across the fields in its search, 'heedless of life and death, heedless of the fear of the unknown'. How wonderfully the poet describes the arrival of spring and the throb of life everywhere around. The atmosphere of a mystic existence, unobtrusive but impregnating the poem, adds deeper beauty to it. Echoes of this experience are clearer in other poems too, in 'Garlands', in 'Black Girl', and especially in 'The Lost One'.

We notice, too, the deep compassion that the poet feels for human suffering. His sympathy for all that men and women have to suffer—injustice, cruelty, oppression, deception, insult—is more deep than ever before. Common men and common women, their ordinary experiences so humdrum that we never cast a glance at them, are touched with a wonderful beauty and lighted by the poet's patient and limitless compassion, until we are filled with a sense of the mystery of the human soul. He etches a whole in a few, bare words, in which he reveals depth below depth of the human heart. His love and sympathy are never sentimental or clothed in verbosity, but are as restrained as they are deep, and always they take on a mysterious spiritual equality which none can define. All this gives the poems an ineffable beauty, a deep intimacy of feeling. Most of them are concerned with the deep secrets and desires and humiliations of the human

heart: its tremors of joy and sorrow, all its minutest feelings in response to love or hate and scorn.

Some poems, however, have a clear social content. In them the poet is a merciless critic of the injustices and cruelties that we daily commit or allow to be committed in our family and social life. Our society has a contemptuous attitude to women; in our huge joint families we seldom pay much attention to their peculiar problems. So fixed is our routine indeed that we seldom know that such things are there. In the poem 'Deliverance' the hopeless young woman says that for twenty-two years she has known nothing but work, work all the time, has never had a moment to look at herself, at her body and soul: all the time for twenty-two years it has been one unvarying, unbroken round of cooking, then eating, then back to cooking again. She is sick now; and, thanks to the rest she is obliged to take because she is sick, she has leisure and can wait for death. Now, at last, she knows she is a woman: spring has arrived in her life although so very late, and joy overflows her soul. 'I am a woman, a great and splendid being. The sleepless moon sings my song in its white light and the flowers open themselves up for my sake. My bridegroom is death; he will quaff the secret fount of joy that wells in me.' So she chants to death: 'Come, sweet death, and make an end of my barren twenty-two years!'

Again, it is not uncommon in our society for old widowers to marry again while their daughters, widowed in childhood, are condemned to spend their barren life in the same household. What shame this is! The cruelty to women and the scorn of womanhood that such an act implies are revealed in the clear yet painful irony of 'Deliverance'. Not only that. The poet also seems to give a hint of how young men and women can revenge this cruelty and scorn of the older generation. The middle-aged father returns home after his remarriage and reads the letter left by his young widow daughter: she has run away with her lover, they will marry and build a home. The father is furious and 'curses his daughter again and yet again'. But we feel relieved that the daughter is at last able to return the injury and insult she has had to suffer silently for so many years!

In *Palātakā* the poet confesses that the men and women of

this world, this earthly paradise, are his nearest and dearest beings, that it is they who have inspired him to sing, that it is the lights and shadows of their lives that this poetry reflects. With deep gratitude the poet thanks all the men and women of the world, and the universe for all its days and nights, all its smiles and tears.

Three years later were published *Śiśu Bholānāth* and *Lipikā*, the latter being a collection of poems in prose.

In *Śiśu Bholānāth* the poet again returns to childhood, to its simple sorrows and joys and playfulness, and to its mysteries also. What we said in connection with *Śiśu* is no less true about *Śiśu Bholānāth*. Only the poems in the later volume have a deeper timbre, and a deeper mystery; the poet seems to stand away and gaze into the ineffable depths of the child's soul.

*Lipikā* is written in the form of prose. But it is poetry really, and that of the highest kind. Poetic form and versification have always been one of the poet's major interests; in *Lipikā* he breaks altogether new grounds by writing poems in a free prose-like metre but in the rhythm of poetry, and he keeps to it for some time. Some of the short passages are, however, clearly verses in a free metre, although most of them are prose poems in which some subtle impression or mood is evoked and expanded. There is a delicate refinement, a beautiful integration and adaptation of form and content, but occasionally there is also a want of condensation. The language is marvellously flawless, the melody superb. In every sense these little sketches are an original creation in our language.

But how do they reflect Tagore's personality? Both in *Lipikā* and in *Śiśu Bholānāth* we see him in a light different from what we have been accustomed to see him so far. He is no longer the keen and eager participant in life that we have so long known him to be, no longer the tireless and ardent lover who clasped everything that life offered, but is a sympathetic, yet detached, spectator who feels less keenly than he sees clearly, a spectator who sees life steadily and sees it whole, who sees it without any bitterness or passion but with a profound serenity. What at one time brought bitter sorrow now brings only sweet, gentle peace. If sorrows and sufferings are there, they bring no pang. Memories of the past wake melancholy echoes in his soul, but the soul is not troubled at all; on the contrary, it is subdued and calm.



Towards the end of 1924 Tagore went to South America at the invitation of the Peruvian Government to attend the centenary celebrations of the South American independence. He toured in South America for four months, and returned to India via Italy. Most of the poems in his next volume of poetry, *Pūrāvī* (An Evening Melody, 1925), was composed during these four months of absence from home.

The lyrics in *Pūrāvī* were composed when the poet was already past sixty, and age sheds a mellow, golden light over them. 'The land beyond the sun' touches the poet's vision and imagination with its pale hue: he can hear the plangent notes of farewell and parting. But this is not all. There is another note which drowns farewell's melancholy tunes in the stormy and tumultuous songs that youth, in breaking its fetters, sings, and he hails this youth as the destroyer of the old and the decaying. Indeed, the two notes alternate. The poet feels with a keen pang that his days in this beautiful world are coming to an end; it pains him deeply as he thinks that one day, and the day will come soon, he will no longer experience all this joy and beauty around him. Most of the poems in *Pūrāvī* are full of this melancholy. Yet there is no complaint, no stormy defiance; rather, there is a silent, brooding acceptance, an assured tranquillity. Then, in some of the other poems, youth returns, youth with its old wild turbulence. How the poet longs to greet it! But, then, he remembers that his life is nearing its sunset, and images of the past, of many trifling events, float back filling him with sorrow, sorrow that trembles with tears.

But the sweet and beautiful past for which his heart yearns, as evening's shadows grew longer and darker, where was this past all these years? The lady, the comrade of his spirit, who, in the early dawn, sat by him on the dew-laden grass and filled him with happiness and charm, when did he meet her, at what sacred moment?

Few poets have had such a deep and true sense of love and beauty, few have had their experience in so much variety and depth. The first hint of this power and penetration we get in *Chhābi O Gān* (Pictures and Songs, 1894); they unfold beautifully in the subsequent volumes from *Kadī O Kamāl* (Sharps and Flats, 1886) to *Mānasī* (The Lady of the Mind, 1890) and *Chitrāṅgadā*; and reach full maturity in *Sonār Tarī* (The

Golden Boat, 1894), *Chitrā* (The Multi-Coloured, 1896) and *Chaitālī* (The Last Harvest, 1896). The world that these books create is full of abounding and overwhelming beauty, warm and sensuous. Never again does he achieve this beautiful feeling and experience, until the sudden and unexpected re-efflorescence in *Pūravi*. Did he, during the years he spent in spiritual contemplation, keep all this love and beauty somewhere hidden in his soul? When, however, they re-emerge, the spiritual and intellectual discipline of the intervening years has enriched and strengthened the poet's inner being, and this richness and strength are imparted to the old sensuousness. It is thus that they reappear in *Pūravi*, in their most sweet and beautiful, dignified and mature form.

*Balākā* ends with a welcome song to the first hot month of Indian summer (1916). After this, a change begins to take place in his life and mind. He feels he is missing something with which he has been familiar all his life. He can no longer converse, as intimately as before, with the men and women and objects of the world. The experience of love and beauty is no longer as easy and unclouded as before. Meanwhile, the realisation that his days here on this earth were coming to an end, had become real. The loss of the love and company of those he has loved, of those 'who have lighted up song's flame in my soul morning and night', is an inconsolable sorrow. No, the poet does not care for the mazes of intellect and ideas any more, does not care any more to understand life's deep secrets and deeper mysteries. 'During the few moments that daylight lasts' he would much prefer to stay with his loved ones. In the last poem in *Palātakā* we hear that it was good to have been friends with the hills and the trees and the rivers, good to have laughed and wept, sorrowed and rejoiced. And the last poem in *Palātakā* is the first in *Pūravi* too. Tired of his sojourn away from this world, he would re-live its life as intensely as he did before. We saw this desire in *Balākā* for the first time, but there, of course, the context and the significance were utterly different. 'The Conqueror' in *Pūravi* continues the strain of *Balākā* rather incongruously, for it has little to do with the main theme. *Balākā*, written when the transition was not yet complete, gives a full knowledge of youth's strength and beauty, but there the realisation is more intellectual and abstract than emotional and

intimate. And the poet was somewhat dissatisfied. Power and knowledge, science and thought are, he seems to have argued, externals in a way, and therefore he sought to turn inwards. With an inward gaze he looked calmly and with detachment at the world outside. This detached, tranquil, yet sweet, look is captured in the lyrics of *Śiṣu Bholānāth* and *Lipikā*. Slowly but surely he comes to the realisation that it is not in the realm of intellectual abstractions, or in that of power that intellect gives, that one can find the consummation that life seeks, the freedom and the joy the human soul yearns for. 'In the earth alone', the poet seems to argue, 'shall we find them, in its dust, in its waters and flowers, among the men and women who live and die here, and not in life's tempestuous swirl, nor in the arrogance of power, nor in the exploration of ever-dark mysteries. Joy and peace we must seek here, in this world's corners, in its festivities and funerals, in its tragedies and comedies.

*Pūrāvī* owes its birth to this realisation.

In many poems in *Sonār Tarī* and *Chitrā* we see how intensely the poet is attracted by the world, what a firm and deep tie unites the poet's life with the life of the world. Everything that exists rouses unmeasured wonder and delight in his soul: summer's burning sun, the clouds during the rains, the autumn sun and green fields; with everything the bond is as deep as it is intense. But we saw that he bade farewell to them all, and in the years that have passed since then he has had many new experiences, felt many new emotions. How, then, does the poet once again remember the past? Why does he do so? He feels as if he has a claim on all this, a claim of the heart on the blue horizons, on the sea's waves. Is not the poet's voice the song of spring wind as it flits through the *śāl* trees, the song of the new leaves awakened in spring? Yes; a claim he had at one time. And if it is not recognised today, the fault is the poet's own. Has he not lost the key? Somebody forced him away from the arms of his mother earth, but can his heart bear this separation, will it not be always fluttering back to her? Many years the poet wandered in search of his mother's arms, and now at last they clasp him once more. He recovers the old nourishment, listens once more to the voice of all the people of the world speaking to him, speaking a message



that he alone can understand.

In 'Playmate in Life', there is the same mood as we find in 'Pūrāvī', the name-piece. The love of his youth had left him, leaving him alone. Today she remembers her old friend, and, once more, as in the past, stands beneath his window and with her bangles plays the old music. The poet comes out of his room and knows her at once. In the old days she came and saw him so often, on so many excuses; many times the poet opened the door as he heard the music of her bangles. Did not the very air vibrate with her presence, did not she distract and enthrall him in so many forms and shapes, sometimes as the blossoms newly budding in the mango trees, sometimes as the heaviness of the new clouds in the sky? And all this the poet can remember today. In her hair she brings the same old magic and perfume, and, outside, the fragrance of the newly bloomed *bakul* flower is redolent of the same past, with all its treasure.

'The Last Offering' is a beautiful sonnet with the same theme. She who sang to the poet the first song of dawn in that great and tender moment when the darkness of the night yields place to the light of a new day, she who guided him to the abounding joy and love of this beautiful world, is today no more in his life. The poet must seek her back, must embrace her again, before night finally closes his life. So he goes out in her quest, although it is so dark in the street: at her feet he must lay the tribute of tears.

The bird flies to the *bakul* grove before the poet's eye, and he asks it: 'There was a time when you roamed in the sky of my soul. Today you and I are no more together, and does not this separation afflict you? I loved you. Can you tell me today if the rain-heavy cloud is waiting for me, if the river song is out of tune because my harp no longer gives out music? Is none weeping to see me lost? You used to know me, will you not know me again? If the time has come for me to cross over to the other shore now, I will do so alone, in my boat of fancy. But before I go, will you not, for the last time, fill my glass with the wine of music, you with whom I have drunk so many draughts of song?'

There is this passionate yearning on the one side, and on the other, a passionate glow of belief, belief that, though his life is now at its evening, his God has himself decked out the skies

with gifts for him, has filled the world with the wine of joy.

'Breaking of Penance' is a superb piece and strikes a somewhat different note. Sonorous in its music, magnificent in its emotion and idea, its diction and structure, it is in every sense worthy of a place beside 'Orvaśi' in *Chitrā*. The god of Time, Śiva, destroyer and preserver, is eternal and keeps a record of every single day of man's life. Has he forgotten the poet's days of youth, days brimming over with life, with the pain of passion, the reckless daring of effort and desire? In those days the poet's hands decked out the god's spare and ascetic body with beauty. He took away the god's shrill and withered trumpet and gave him the flute and the cymbal, and banished his contemplation to the land of eternal snow and silence. And from an ascetic the god was transfigured by the poet's spell into the passionate and youthful lover, eager to drink in all the voluptuous pleasures that the world could offer. In return, this transfigured god gave forth to the poet abundant love and music and delight, taught him all the notes whose melody filled the world. But then the poet himself grew old, and as this happened somebody took away the god's bright garb of youth; and his dance of destruction shattered the beautiful urn full of unsung songs, of unshed tears. Are the poet's beautiful days of youth, then, withered by the drought and waste of summer? But no. Neither the poet's nor the god's youth and passion are lost: they are only hidden under the silence and night of penance and contemplation. They will surge up once more; youth will shatter the chains of age and well out in impetuous flood, singing wild bacchanals of passion and delight. The poet cannot let the god stay hidden in his age and asceticism. He is the agent of heaven's conspiracy against all this; he knows that the god of Time, Śiva, is only trying to deceive him by the show of a spare and withered exterior, the harsh and ungainly barks covering his surface only. But the withered god is all the time waiting to be defeated by the poet, by the poet's beauty and youth. The poet bears enchantment in his song, and the spell will transfigure the god once again. Beautiful and young, then, the god will throw away his ugly garment and wear silken robes and a garland; he will return to Umā, his long forgotten bride, and as they are in one another's arm, the poet's lyre will echo the music of their union.

Is not the god, the poet himself; does he not appear here as the deepest longing of his soul, the longing to remain ever young, ever to live a life of unending passions and desires and experiences?

In *Pūravi*, then, there is an essential transformation. It is not confined to the theme alone; it affects the expression too. I have said that 'Tapobhaṅga' or 'Breaking of Penance' is full of the echoes of 'Uṛvaśī'. Such echoes of older poems we shall find in many other poems in *Pūravi*. Even in the matter of diction and metre the poet returns to the world where he lived in youth. There is tempest in the music of *Balākā*, wild reckless aspiration that sweeps us off our feet and fills us with a passionate disgust for the cramped pettinesses in which most of us live. But this music, however imperious in its effect, lacks a certain quality of fullness, such fullness as we see in the river rolling majestically on to the sea, not in its swirl and flood but in a calm but full and swelling tide. And in the swelling chords of *Pūravi* it is this fullness and harmony of assurance that we find again and again.

Joy and beauty of the world, put by for so many years, are re-entering the poet's soul but re-entering in shy and hushed steps. They vanished so suddenly before the poet had had time to know them well, the light of their sacred eyes had sunk so soon in deep darkness. Today, therefore, the poet calls upon the sky to fling aside the blue curtain and let him seek out in its infinite space that flitting and half-known shadow of joy that had come into this life so timidly, so hesitantly. It was only a shadow, a figure of silence. But on a sudden its footsteps begin to echo in his music, its invisible fingers caress him and move him to tears in his dream. And he yearns to discover it in the real world.

'The Grateful' deals with his forgotten, yet not altogether forgotten, past. It is replete with a tender and pathetic beauty. He talks of his beloved. It is long, long since he parted from her, since she kissed him for the last time, and the poet forgot her for many years. But today her vanished image comes back, and the poet asks to be forgiven because he did not remember her for so many years. She is no more there to hold him in her arms and move him to music. But the bond between them is immortal, it exists in its beauty. She no



longer lives in his house, where all is dark and cheerless because she is not there but nothing can efface the painful memory that she was once with him.

He remembers the past, its joy and beauty. But he sees also that his life is dark with the shadows of approaching end. To the lovely music that he plays in *Pūravi* there is also the poignant counterpoint of farewell: we see the pang at its keenest in 'Playmate in Life', to which a reference has already been made. His youth's beloved has returned to his heart, but the moments that still remain for him are so few: when will he sing the welcome song, take her up tenderly in his heart? The day is closing, and in the west the sun's last rays are trembling with the sorrow of farewell, and, besides, he has lost the flute he used to play when he was young. Will they play their last game together in the darkness of the moonless night, try and find each other's soul in the unseen land of death?

There is then this bitter anguish for vanished youth, the equally anguished waiting for the last day. This cannot but affect the reader's mind too. But somehow one cannot help feeling that, although the poet is old in years, a time will come when he will discard the withered and yellow robe of age, and become young once more in song and music. Once more there must be a resurgence. And a resurgence came, as we shall see in the poems that he wrote during the last ten years of his life.

We can see it somewhat in *Mahuā* published in 1929, four years after *Pūravi*. But, in the meantime, we must mention a comparatively unknown book, *Lekhan* (Autographs, 1927). The poems in it are very short, never exceeding eight lines, somewhat like the verses in *Kanikā*. The poet himself appended English translations to the Bengali poems. As he informs us, he wrote them on slips of paper, fans, pieces of silk, at the request of those who came to see him when he was travelling in Japan and China. He says that we do not sufficiently respond to the beauty of small poems, but the Japanese do, because they can see great things in the so called small things. 'They cannot even think of measuring beauty in terms of yards or pounds.' And the poems in *Lekhan* are like little buds blossoming in wayside shrubs. The verses in *Lekhan* are really poetic, while those in *Kanikā* are didactic. Much wealth of feeling and thought is congealed in their short space, and

the poet could never have achieved such beauty without a profound crystallisation of emotion, a great power of discipline and restraint. As simple as they are bare, these poems in their shortness have a concentrated wholeness, a transparent integrity of form and content.

*Mahuā* registers the surge of a new inspiration. For spring, whose approach *Pūrāvī* heralds, arrives at last. The title of the book is beautifully appropriate, for the poems in it are heavy with the intoxicating fascination of the *Mahuā*, a strong-scented spring flower. The love poems in this book are the most characteristic. As in Tagore's youth, so now, in spite of the intoxicating and sensuous message that the spring flowers speak in their flaming, deep demasked beauty, in spite of the grand abandon with which love carries out its part, this love remains essentially above the senses. There is a parity of restraint, a kind of bodyless, platonic passion, that lifts sensuous desire itself above the human plane, and we shall find this idealism even in those poems that are frankly physical in their appeal.

There is also another point to notice. The woman imagined as the ideal of love is nowhere soft, ready to surrender herself to man, begging to be loved. Her love, on the contrary, is based on an essential integrity of soul, on courage and truth; it is defiant, militant. The very first poem, in which the poet rehandles an old legend, shows this conception of love and womanhood. *Kāmadeva*, that is, Cupid, Indian legends say, was burnt to ashes by *Śiva*; yet it is *Kāmadeva* who is the source of all creative energy; so he must be reawakened to life. Not the old *Kāma* but a new one, cleansed by *Śiva*'s fire of every dross of weakness, of every despicable softness, a *Kāmadeva* erect and proud and strong. And this theme, this conception of *Kāmadeva* is present in all the poems in *Mahuā*.

Yet another aspect of love we get in the lyrics garnered from the novel *Śeṣher Kavita* (The Last Poem, 1929) and included in *Mahuā*. Although they have certain basic moods in common, they belong to a rather different world from the rest of the poems in *Mahuā*. They are also more artistic, more immediately poetic, and have a greater intensity and complexity of emotion.

*Vanavāṇī* (The Message of the Forest, 1931) came out just two years after *Mahuā*. It contains hymns to trees and

creepers and flowers. They are inspired by the poet's old love of nature, but now this love is enriched by a maturer culture and a deeper understanding of tradition.

The poems are divided into four classes according to substance. In the first, there are the hymns of adoration to the birds and beasts of forests, to creepers and trees. In the second, there are hymns to freedom, to youth, and to the freshness that never dies out in nature's life. Each season is a new face of the world, which is the floor whereon dances the eternally dancing god of Time, the Natarāja. The seasons in their perpetual cycle come and destroy all old accumulation, scatter it about and make ready the coming of the new. 'As the god dances, one of his feet convulses and transforms the external world, the other, the world of the soul. The delight of sharing in this eternal and infinite freedom will liberate our soul too, if we can join in this tremendous and everlasting dance.' The poet repeats here an old message we have heard from him many times. Most of this section is operatic, and so, except for a few beautiful poems, it consists of songs. The third section is entitled 'Welcome to the Rains and the Tree-Planting Festival'. Here too the theme is the same: a hymn to trees and seasons. The fourth section is a hymn to the everlasting freshness of spring and youth.

In the introduction the poet calls the trees 'my dumb friends who are in love with light and stretch their fingers to the sky.' 'They speak the world's oldest language and send an echo to my soul's deepest core.' And the soul answers back 'in the language of the trees, a language which has no meaning that can be expressed, yet hums with all the memories of the ages long past.' 'The greatest liberation of all, as the ancient sages of the *Upanishads* saw, is to feel in one's veins the surge of this earliest life, the life which, so old, is yet ever alive, ever dynamic, ever forging for itself new forms and modes in which it can reveal itself'.

We know that from early youth Tagore used to see nature as permeated with the same life of emotion as that of man. This belief that nature is alive in all the senses in which man is, he never gives up or forgets, rather the years only enrich this belief, deepen it, until, in a deep spiritual synthesis, the poet creates and discovers a new significance in the world of



nature. This synthesis and this significance we find clearly in *Vanavāṇī*. In early youth he wrote simple descriptions of nature, but in *Sonār Tarī* there is a deeper communion with it which crystallises into an absorbed self-identification in *Chitrā*. In *Balūkā* and *Pūrāvī* there is yet further development, and further penetration; at the final stage which is revealed in *Vanavāṇī*, he achieves an integration of his personal attitude with that of the forest-dwelling sages of the *Upanishads*. And in superb poetry the poet recaptures all the wonder, all the unfathomed mystery which must have belonged to life's first language in which the trees and forests speak, to the world's oldest history as recorded in them. Man hears this voice in the rarest of moments: it requires a mind rich with all the gifts of culture to make poetry out of it. Tagore does so in *Vanavāṇī*, not only in the poems but in the songs too.

One cannot perhaps help noting a very significant fact as one penetrates into the spirit of the poems and songs in *Vanavāṇī*—the intensity of the enveloping inspiration that Śiva, the greatest of the Brahmanical Trinity, imparted to the poet's imagination. This great god seems to stride across the entire realm of the Indian religious tradition; all our conceptions of life and death, of this world and the next, of the birth and decay of the seasons, centre round this figure. The god of destruction, he is a figure of awe and terror; again, he is an ascetic, a barbarian, uninitiated in courtly manners, whom Dakṣha was ashamed to own as his son-in-law and turned him out of his court. He is madly in love with Satī, his wife, and when she loves him he remains cold for many years. And he is also the god of Time and Eternity, of Change and Rest, of all that is good and beautiful, all that brings delight to the mind and the senses. In the ancient texts, he towers above all the other gods. It is not strange that this mysterious god with so many potencies, one whose nature is so richly various and contradictory, should make a profound appeal to Tagore's imagination. Indeed, no other god or goddess of the Hindu pantheon has stirred him in such a deep and complex manner. The myth of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, or that of Śiva's terrific consort, Kālī, which impregnates Bengal's native culture, hardly struck roots in him, the popular goddesses Lakṣmī and Sarasvatī seldom spoke to his imagination. In this matter Tagore belongs to the classical Indian tradition as a

whole rather than to any of its segments. Śiva is the dominating figure in Sanskrit poetry and also in old Bengali poetry. But Tagore's rehandling of the Śiva myth is more complex, more richly imaginative, than in the older poets. To Śiva's figure he turns again and again; there is no end to the symbolism he evokes out of it. Whenever he has to describe the fierce, terrible moods of nature, or the moods of passionate ascetic contemplation of the human soul, whenever again, he describes the passionate and rebellious surge of youth, and, finally, when he describes the massive grandeur of love and beauty, it is this god who is his symbol.

Love has an aspect of meditation, of an ascetic aspiration, and in this Tagore believes as passionately as his ancient illustrious predecessor, Kālidāsa does. Like Kālidāsa he sees it embodied in the myth of Śiva lost in endless and austere contemplation in which Umā, unknown to him, joins him after Kāma's conspiracy fails. Again and again Tagore turns to this awesome story, which has the infinitely majestic Himalayas for its background; his poetry contains endless allusions to it. The association of Śiva with the dance and song and delight of the various seasons, the embodiment of time's passage in the eternally dancing figure of Śiva, belongs perhaps to the south Indian tradition. The South imagines *chidambaram* (the sky of the soul) as the floor whereon Time's god Śiva dances his ceaseless dance, and this imagination appeals powerfully to Tagore. But Tagore not only assimilates the Śiva tradition, he enriches it with all the wealth of his original inspiration. The Śiva myth as we find it in the ancient texts, for example, is not so rich in manifold suggestions as Tagore makes it in 'Breaking of Penance' in *Pūrāṇī* or in the poems and songs in *Vanavāṇī*. In many cases the poet expands the ancient tradition, adds fresh significance to it, gives it new volume and depth.

*Vanavāṇī* marks the end of a phase. A year later was published his next volume of poems, *Parīkṣā* (The End, 1932), which by its title seems to imply that the curtain was coming down on the final act of his life's drama. Actually, it was the beginning of a new one.

The most exacting muse in Tagore's life was the muse of poetry, of song and music, of drama. Write poetry he must; so must he compose songs, set them to tune and sing; so must he compose plays, stage them and also act in each one of them, sometimes in more than one role. When in old age he could act no more he would sit on a small platform on one side of the stage. From where did he derive this endless energy, where was the spring of this intense and unceasing flow of creative life? The poet did not know himself, nor do we know him. But he felt that he could never help this energy bubbling up, this unceasing flow rushing out; any attempt to stem it could only be at the expense of his being, as it were. When the spirit would be on him he would act like one possessed. His biographers have recorded how fast he composed his songs and set the tunes, or made his paintings, and this is clear testimony to what he used to do when thus possessed. Somewhat similar must have been his experience when he wrote poetry and his symbolical dramas.

The first symbolical drama he wrote during this phase of life is *Phālgunī* (The Spring, 1916), a delightful play with practically no plot and no characterisation, but surcharged and saturated with the life-giving spirit of spring bursting with song and dance and a joyous abandon. It is a hymn to the spirit of spring, a hymn to youth and love. One fine morning a king discovers a few grey hairs in his head, and starts worrying about the sure approach of old age and death. His court poet, to divert his mind, stages a play—confessing at the same time that he does not know if it is a play or a poem or a drama or a masque—in which a group of boys set upon the old man Winter and when in their playful mirth they unrobe him they find out that he is Spring. A very fanciful theme indeed, but not without the symbolisation of an idea which assumes shape through the dialogue, the music, the songs and the dances. The poet in the play says, 'In every age man has to fight death; the spring wind is full of its echoes, the green leaves rustle with the words of immortal heroes who gave away their lives in the fight: we did not care whether the path was correct or not, we just blossomed irresistibly.' And the writer of the drama says,



'Death alone contains life's true experience. He who fears death and hopes to go on clinging to life somehow has never known real life, his every moment is a death. He does not respect life. He who, unafraid, sweeps forward to seize death, discovers that his prisoner is life itself. When we have not the courage to stand face to face with death, we only see the shadow it casts behind, and that makes us afraid...' The youths in *Phālgunī* are holding spring celebrations, and the burden of their songs is: 'We will go forward and capture old age and death'. And this is what youth does, what happens time after time in man's history.

Seven years later, shortly after his return from a long sojourn abroad, Tagore wrote *Muktadhārā* (The Free Current, 1922). His next drama *Raktakarabī* (The Red Oleanders, 1926) was published after a little less than four years. Thematically both the plays are concerned with the nature and problems of contemporary civilisation: madness of power, man *versus* machine, the impersonal character of modern industry, etc. The situations of both the plays are laid in an imaginary past India, but the inspiration of both has a definite modern timbre. In the perspective of the poet's growing world consciousness, things that he had formerly overlooked, take on a peremptory significance.

*Muktadhārā*<sup>1</sup> opens dramatically with a scene in which the power-mad king Raṇajit of Uttarkūṭ and his vainglorious subjects are on the eve of celebrating a festival in honour of the huge machine their chief engineer Bibhūti has built to stop, by means of a dam, the flow of the river Muktadhārā which is the only source of water-supply for the people of Śivtarāi, a small neighbouring tract. The king's sole aim is to subdue the rebellious people of this tract by stopping their water-supply. The people of Śivtarāi start in protest a non-violent resistance movement under the leadership of a *sannyāsi* called Dhanañjay Vairāgi, and king Raṇajit sends his son, prince Abhijit, to put down the rebellious movement. Abhijit, however, wins over the people of Śivtarāi by his love, sympathy and understanding, and dismantles a prestige-site in order to benefit Śivtarāi's trade.

<sup>1</sup> The play is available in English, in *Three Plays*, Oxford University Press, Bombay, 1950. It comprises translations of *Muktadhārā*, *Nafīr Pūjā* and *Chandālikā* by Marjorie Sykes.

But the step is vehemently opposed by the jingoistic people of Uttarkūt. Prince Abhijit is relieved of his assignment, and his successor sets in motion a brutally oppressive regime. Śivtarāi, already suffering from a terrible famine, finds the burden of oppression quite intolerable, but Uttarkūt is in an orgy of joy about its victory over Śivtarāi. Meanwhile, Abhijit has heard from the king's uncle that he is not really the king's son but was picked up by the king near the Muktaḍhārā and brought up as his son. He does not, therefore, belong to the king's family, or to any one else; he belongs to every one, everywhere he has a home. In the celebrations in Uttarkūt he feels an insult to the human soul; he decides that his place is with the oppressed and exploited people of Śivtarāi. He appeals to Bibhūti and the people of Uttarkūt to desist from utterly ruining Śivtarāi, but in vain. Abhijit is imprisoned at the king's order, but somebody sets fire to the prison. Viśvajit, the king's uncle, offers to rescue him and hide him somewhere, but Abhijit declines. When Uttarkūt learns that the prisoner is not to be found in the prison, all the people set out to find him out. It is a dark night, and the searchers are suddenly startled by a tremendous roar: it is the roar of the river Muktaḍhārā, released free from the prison of the dam. Prince Sañjoy informs the frenzied crowd that it was Abhijit who blew up the dam; but the machine too had its revenge, for the swirl of the water engulfed Abhijit, and no one saw him again.

This, far from perfect, summary hardly gives any idea of the beauty and humanity of the play, so clearly set forth in the erect and dauntless soul of Abhijit, in the characters and their words pregnant with meaning, in the songs of the rebel leader Dhanañjay. The noble ideal of humanity, freed from all bondages of mind and matter, is explicit in the play and moulds the character of the hero Abhijit and the *sannyāsi* leader Dhanañjay. But more remarkable than even this is the awareness of the contemporary perversions of nationalism and of the inhumanity of all forms of domination of one people by another. This awareness inspires the drama.

Certain familiar types reappear in the characters. Dhanañjay is indistinguishable from his namesake in the earlier play, *Prāyaścitta* (Atonement, 1909), and the uncle Viśvajit has the same features as Vasanta Ray of the same play or of the novel

*Bau-Thākurañir Hāt* (1883) on which *Prāyaścitta* is based.

Despite its pronounced emphasis on the idea and its lyricism, *Muktadhārā* is pre-eminently dramatic, and though it was never staged during the lifetime of Tagore, it has definite dramatic possibilities. But *Raktakarabī* is thin and unconvincing as a drama. A peculiar amalgam of realism and reason, of mysticism and symbolism is woven into the texture of a situation that has hardly any movement or complication. We see a group of men and women, each representing a different stratum of social existence and consciousness, each confined in the prison house of greed, custom and superstition. Nandinī, a symbol of undying love and life, stands outside the iron bars of the prison and beckons to each to come out and share in the abounding joy of the sunlight. The call thrills every one, and they all feel eager to leave their cages behind and follow Nandinī. Each character is a full embodiment of the social level to which he belongs, of its civilisation and consciousness.

The king of *Yakshapuri* (a significant name with a rich association in the Indian mind) is an inhuman and brutal ruler, and gold is the only thing he cares for. He treats his people as if they were only so many machines to produce gold. The workers in the gold mines are only numbered automata and are not supposed to have a soul at all. Here free life does not exist. The king is imprisoned in his greed, the priest in his religion, the scholar in his pedantry, and the workers in oppression and exploitation. Nandinī, the one symbol of life, stands outside the iron bars of the vast prison which is *Yakshapuri*, and the prisoners, as they hear her words, feel restless, troubled by obscure and unfamiliar desires. The king lusts after her as he lusts after gold, but this is not the way to possess love and life, and so Nandinī eludes him. None indeed knows the secret, none can understand her message, although they all feel her beauty and are disturbed by it. Nandinī loves Rāñjan; but Rāñjan too is imprisoned by the machine and eventually sacrificed as its victim. Love and life assert themselves through his death and life is reborn in order to recreate love.

Clearly Tagore's main preoccupation here is with the conflict between the unfettered spirit of life and the dehumanising effect of a mechanised society sustained by a highly organised state and an equally highly organised industrial economy, between the



virtual and creative impulses of man and the regimented will of the state and society. Equally clear is the side on which the poet's commitments lie. But, howsoever significant this fact is from the point of view of his evolving personality, the attitude and approach, as worked out in the play, are romantic and suggestive rather than dramatically convincing.

Encouraged by the stage success of one of his earlier humorous plays, *The Bachelors' Club*, the poet dramatised, towards the end of this phase and for the professional stage, two of his earlier short stories, *Karmaphal* (Fruit of Action, 1903) into *Śodh-bodh* (The Final Repayment, 1926) and *Śesher Rātri* (The Last Night) into *Griha-prabes* (The Home-coming, 1925); the former is a social satire on inordinate social ambition leading to moral bankruptcy, and the latter is a poignant tragedy treated somewhat sentimentally.

But among the more significant plays that he wrote towards the end of this phase are the musical ones, written in celebration of the seasons, especially the Rains and the Spring, and an exquisite drama of music and dance, *Nafir Pūjā* (Worship by the Dancing Girl, 1926), based on a Buddhist legend, symbolising the challenge of Buddhism to the traditional Hindu religion and society.

Apart from his inner creative urge for expression, he had an external stimulus too in writing the open-air symbolical dramas like *Śaradotsav* and *Phālgunī*. This stimulus came from the boys and girls of the *āśrama-school* at Santiniketan, which had meanwhile been transformed into the *Viśva-Bhāratī*. The poet wanted to provide for these boys and girls such creative entertainments as would sharpen their senses and sensibilities and widen their vision and imagination. Here, at Santiniketan, it was another Bengal, different from the one he had known on the banks of the *Padmā* and its tributaries. Here the various seasons of the year could be seen and experienced in their full beauty and glory, particularly the rains, the autumn and the spring. Rains here come in all their splendour and majesty over the stretching plains parched and opened up by fissures during the dry long-drawn days of burning summer, and then the humble *Kopāi* and the dry and narrow rills roar in torrents. Earth and nature are covered with rich green, all on a sudden, as it were, and the *kadamba* and *ketakī* are in bloom. Then comes

Autumn all but suddenly after the unceasing drippings of *Srāvan*, and one fine morning white clouds float in the clear blue sky, sunshine is liquid gold, the white *kāś* quivers in waves in the field and the soft fragrance of the white *śephālī* brings the message of sweet bliss. The winter at Santiniketan is sharp if not severe, and life everywhere is at a low ebb, but when spring comes it brings a riot of life and colour all around, infuses the joy and vigour of youth into everything, and the strong and intoxicating *mahuā* flower in full bloom quickens the flow of blood in every veins. One's senses must be dull if they are not touched by the changing seasons at Santiniketan. That Tagore would react and respond to the seasonal changes with all his richness of feeling, vision, imagination and passion, and share his experience with the inmates is but natural.

These reactions and responses came in the shape and form of plays replete with songs and music and dances—songs which turned out to be the receptacle of a new form and tradition of music, and dances which eventually broke through the cold abstraction and formalism of the classical dance forms of Kathākali, Manipuri and Kandyani, by making them bend to the requirements of the mood of the song and music and by introducing into them new forms from our folk and tribal dances. Indeed in the dances he followed the same principles as he did and would be doing in a still more revolutionary manner in the field of music, and because of the same urge for the expansion of his personality. Truth to tell, he would be creating what after his death would come to be known as the contemporary form of Indian ballet. The seed of this later growth was sown during this phase of life which was also the phase of the beginning of his real creative work in the realm of music. So long he had repeated the course of the development of Indian music, which means that he had obeyed the same principles as had been done by great musicians of the past. But from now on he would be doing something which none had attempted or dared to do in the past, that is, he would be blending *rāgas* and *rāginīs* in keeping with the similarity of moods and sentiments, notes and time-scales,—experiments that had neither the sanction of texts nor of traditional practice. But of this later, when we would be speaking of the next phase of his life, since it would be then that his creative contribution to

our music and dance will take shape and form.

The earliest of such reactions and responses, as I referred to a while ago, are to be found in the *Varshā-Maṅgal* (Festival of the Rains, 1922), followed by *Vasantotsav* (Spring Festival, 1922), and five years later by *Natarāja Riturāṅgaśālā* (Natarāja's Theatre of the Seasons, 1927). Like *Sārodatsav* and *Phālgunī*, written in celebration of the Autumn and Spring Festivals respectively, these compositions too are hymns in song and dance to the sheer joy of living. He will be writing more of them in the remaining years of his life: *Śeṣhvarshan* (The Last Rains), *Sundar* (The Beautiful), *Navin* (The New, 1931), for instance; they may, therefore, be considered together. Thematically, and also from the point of view of construction, *Nafir Pūjā* belongs to a different category and may, for the sake of convenience, be grouped with *Chañḍālikā* (The Chañḍālā or Untouchable Girl, 1933), *Śāpmochan* (Release from Curse, 1931), *Nṛityanāṭya Chitrāṅgaḍā* (Dance-drama Chitrāṅgaḍā, 1936), and *Śyāmā* (1939), since all of them have a story to tell and an idea to convey, and hence have plots and characters, situations and movements. The last four compositions belong to the next phase of his life; we shall therefore speak of *Nafir Pūjā* along with these four in the next chapter.

The seasonal plays are a class by themselves and defy classification or characterisation. Music, poetry, drama, dance, religious mysticism, wise thoughts, sheer fun and frivolity, comments on contemporary affairs, are all taken at one stride as the thin threads of dialogue connect the colourful blossoms of songs and dances. There is no speech and hardly any plot or character or situation; even if they are there, they have but little significance. It is difficult to fix any academic label on them and call them play or drama or any such thing; they inevitably elude our popular nomenclature. Yet they are the most joyous plays, plays of life itself in the true sense—pure, fine and delicate, subtle and tenuous. Captivatingly beautiful are the images and the evocations of joy and loveliness that the poet scatters through the songs, the music and the dances, and all these fuse in one integrated structure which quivers with an intensity of feeling.

But, however unearthly in the long run this impression may be, the poet has a statement to make in these compositions also. *Śeṣh Varshan* and *Vasanta* are direct continuations of *Sārodatsav*



and *Phālgunī*; only the story is more simplified. We notice here too the recurrence of a king and a queen. The king and his court are sunk in material concerns, which absorb them so much that they are unable to take a part even in the celebrations of the season. The poet in the play on the other hand is a worshipper of beauty and does not care for worldly goods at all. When he loses himself in the ecstasy of union with nature, somehow the king too is infected with the joy, and even his finance secretary is so infected. And then only is the festival rounded and perfected. Perfect union between man and nature, this is the real meaning of all celebrations of the seasons, and in this union the spiritual wholeness of all life that exists reveals itself.

*Naṭarāj Riturāṅgaśālā* has yet a deeper import. As the god of Eternity dances, says the poet, one of his feet churns and convulses the external world, the other convulses the world of the soul in a similar way. We must make ourselves one with this passionate Dance of Eternity, both in our spirit and in our senses; ineffable joy and peace and liberation will then descend upon us. *Naṭarāj* is also the god of Time, and his dance is the dance of life itself. The world revolves, the seasons recur in a perpetual cycle, according to the motion and rhythm of his dance, and they bloom and sing with its passion. Around the figure of *Naṭarāj* a wonderful mythology has grown up in the course of a long and intimate tradition. And in the operatic play the poet embodies the whole tradition in its deepest and most abiding significance, as he embodies the deepest beauty and rhythm and colour of the seasons. In this dance, in this ever-unfolding pattern, there is liberation as well as discipline in the conscious obedience of every rebellious element to deeper laws. To this freedom and this discipline the poet invites us; he teaches us a perfection that does not exclude but does embrace every motion of soul and passion in a pattern of beauty and song. Such a perfect harmony of science and tradition, of external diversity and contradiction and the quiet and deep realisations of the soul is rare indeed in any literature.

writing was over by the end of the last century, when Tagore sojourned frequently on the Padmā and its tributaries. I have already spoken about these stories, about their concern with the life of the common people in all its simple but bewildering variety, about their strong feeling for nature, about their revelation of humanity in the most unexpected situations and characters. Whether a story is of mood and feeling, or of temperament and character, or of atmosphere and psycho-analysis, the craft of story-telling, the strong impression of reality of our contemporary rural life with its simple and direct appeal have never been surpassed. *Nashṭanīd* (The Broken Nest), that remarkable story or short novel, to which a reference has already been made, marks the end of that phase, but it also marks the beginning of another, of the so-called problem story. The phase under review is taken up by the problem story, so far as story-writing is concerned. Now it is not so much feeling and atmosphere as reason and intellect, 'not so much love as understanding, not the reality of living as the process of growth, not acceptance but refusal, that is to say, now it is a note of protest against the injustice of abstractions and institutions on the ground of personality', points out a discerning critic.<sup>1</sup> Indeed he is getting more and more concerned with the problems of Hindu middle-class family life and the tragic position of women in such families, their protests against injustice and inhumanity and their assertion of themselves as individuals. One can easily see in the stories of this phase one aspect of the intellectual and spiritual crisis that the author was passing through during this period of life, which was brought about by a deeper understanding of the world situation; another aspect of this crisis is reflected in the poems in *Balākā* and *Palātakā*, as well as in the two plays, *Muktadhārā* and *Raktakarabī*.

Altogether there is about half-a-dozen of such stories: *Strīr Patra* (The Wife's Letter), *Paylā Nambar* (Number One), *Pātra O Pātrī* (The Bride and the Groom), *Nāmañjur* (Not Permitted), *Bhāi-Phonṭā* and *Boshtamī* (The Woman Devotee of Vishṇu), not all of which are accomplished pieces of story-telling. But one must take notice of at least one story, 'The Wife's Letter', if one is to bring out the thread that was being

<sup>1</sup> Tagore: A Study by Dhurjati Prasad Mukherji, p. 115.

woven into the texture of the poet's personality. It carries on and develops the theme of an earlier story, *Harimati*, which brings out, with bitter ironical denunciation, the tragedy ending in the death of a wife of a selfish and coward husband in a smug Hindu middle-class family. In 'The Wife's Letter', the wife, after a life of fifteen years' untold suffering, writes, in Ibsenian fury as it were, to her husband in assertion of her right to freedom.

'I am the second daughter-in-law of your family, wife of the second son. Today, after fifteen years of wifehood, I realise, as I stand on the seashore, that I am something else; that I have my own world and my own God. What I have gone through in the years I have spent in your family has at last brought me face to face with myself—my real self, hidden so long... True, you have power, but there is a limit to that power... You kept from me my real self, wrapped up in the darkness and blindness of custom... I never knew I was a creature of so much glory and so much splendour. And God loves my soul. His eyes look at me from the beautiful sky. The wife in me is dead, but I am at last alive and I will live.'

There is no trace of the old, beautiful and palpitating grace, the frail emotions which are so delicate that the softest words seem to be too hard to express them. Instead we have harsh irony, the grating accents of life itself, the fierce directness of uncompromising battle. Mrināl, the wife, will have no truck with our smugness, and she pitilessly shatters the wall of illusions we had built up around life in order to keep out realities. 'The Wife's Letter' perhaps lacks the artistic perfection of 'The Broken Nest', but there is, to compensate, the overwhelming coherence and truth of life itself, and the aggressive passion with which the girl declares the revolt of her womanhood, her naked sincerity, which well-nigh neutralises the didactic note of the story. The savage irony of the story created quite a sensation among the intellectuals of the time. Subsequently, there was almost a suffragette movement in Bengal, and Tagore's story provided it with many slogans.

In the poem 'Deliverance' in *Palātākā* there is an echo of Mrināl's revolt. A woman is slowly dying after a married life of twenty-two years of neglect, of the most frightful barrenness. But as death approaches, spring arrives in her life for the first



time; she knows at last she is a woman, a creature of glory and grandeur. As she looks at the sky through the window she feels: 'Joy throbs in my heart. I am a woman and so I am great, for a sleepless moon sings my music in the lyre of his light.' And this also is the substance of 'The Wife's Letter'. The contempt and scorn of womanhood disguised by our romantic adoration is fully exposed in both.

More than a decade later, about a year and a half before he breathed his last, towards the end of 1940 to be exact, were published three more short stories, *Rabibār* (Sunday), *Sesh Kathā* (The Last Word) and *Laboratory*. They are his last three short stories, although *Sesh Kathā* has all the artistry, the mood and atmospheric significance of his earlier creations of roughly the last decade of the nineteenth century. But the other two grow naturally out of the developments of this phase of evolution of the poet's personality. Meanwhile, he has forged a new savoury nervous style in his novels written during this phase and he has acquired also a firmer grasp of social realities. The dreaminess and easy grace of the early stories are replaced by a tough resilience, a bitter, yet uncynical, disillusionment. An intellect, as sharp as it is ironical and clear, now comes to the foreground, and moulds his outlook and style in an altogether new way. Instead of the facility and soft music of the early style we now have the qualities that we never saw before in Bengali prose: edge and sharpness, precision and directness, bright, transparent clarity. The style becomes increasingly concentrated, harshly tough, disciplined. Instead of being metaphorical, it becomes epigrammatic, ironic, equivocal, a style which combines frivolity with a deadly seriousness of purpose.

Social realism which was the dominant ideology of the thirties of this century, at any rate in Bengal, also indirectly helped the poet to turn his attention from subjective exploration of the individual soul, as in 'The Wife's Letter', to an objective exploration of the social matrix in which the human soul grows up. In *Rabibār* and *Laboratory* he squarely faces the modern human situation with all its disorder and contradiction, and offers his incisive comments in terms of the characters and situations in the stories, especially in *Laboratory* which is the longest, the most sensational and the most glamorous of the three.

Very early during this phase, in 1914, Tagore wrote and published two novels, one immediately after the other, *Chaturanga* (A Set of Four, 1916) and *Ghare Baire* (The Home and the World, 1916). The former is one of the finest, one of the tensest, and one of the most compact and competent works of art that Tagore ever produced; the latter was destined to be one of the greatest and most significant novels in Bengali literature, perhaps only next to *Gorā*. Till 1926, he would not write any other work of this genre.

*Chaturanga* consists of four chapters and of only four characters, one of whom tells the story in turn and carries it forward through situations which in their turn seem to mould the characters in their three dimensional depths. The narration is characterised by dramatic intensity, the situations are unfolded swiftly, without any elaboration of details, and the impressions are conveyed in brief, flitting hints and suggestions. The diction is simple but rich in poetry and sensitivity, and the sentences used are short; the images are clear and the few symbols introduced, as the one of the primeval beast in the cave scene, are of tremendous significance. An elderly uncle, Jagamohan, is not altogether an uncommon product of the atheist-rationalist-humanist culture of the latter half of the nineteenth century Bengal; he firmly believes in a mundane goal of human destiny. Śachīs, his nephew, is an ardent and serious, but vacillating, young man, who starts his life as an atheist and rationalist under the influence of his uncle, but soon finds himself, after the death of the uncle, under a religious hypnosis of a most obscurantist sort, and knows not what he is after. A young woman, Dāminī, once a fiery rebel against the naked aggressiveness of religion, meets Śachīs, falls in love with him, and 'shines out like a lightning transfixed in the sky'. But Śachīs was under a spell and in no stage of normal responses; eventually she gets a violent rebuff from him, which however does not deter her from nursing a love for him. But, then, there is Śrīvilās, a friend of Śachīs and a loving admirer of Dāminī, with an individuality of his own, who refuses to be 'a wave in the deluge of sameness in which all distinctness is lost'. When Dāminī is all over with Śachīs, Śrīvilās is the one who cares for her as he has ever done,

and Dāmini knows it too. Organic inner laws were already at work, and when Śribilās offers to marry her, 'Dāmini sees him for the first time'.

*Chaturāṅga* just falls short of greatness. It has depth of understanding of human situations, but not breadth, and no magnitude of substance; it establishes no relation with the many-sided currents of human life. Its outlook is fragmentary; it does not reflect the vision and imagination of total life. Yet *Chaturāṅga* is an exquisite and unforgettable work of art. Its intellectual depth and brilliance, its subile evocations of mystery, the brief but pregnant descriptions, the wonderful psychological analysis of characters and situations, its wisdom and sympathy, and its poetic wealth, all go to make it a work of exceptional value.

The theme of *Ghare Baire* centres round the conflict of political ideals and actions *versus* human values and human desires. The setting of the novel is the *Svadeśī* and revolutionary movements of the first decade of the twentieth century in which Tagore had played a part and of which he had thus an intimate personal experience. Judging from the very adverse reception the novel had, it seems to have made a deep impact on contemporary Bengali intellectuals because of its vivid and ironic indictment of unscrupulous politicians, of its denunciation of violence, aggressive intents and methods and chauvinistic nationalism, and of the humanist logic of good ends being the product of good means, and equally humanist ideals of love and truth in any given situation. Most of the arguments raised by those who attacked the book are irrelevant for our purpose. But the author made some remarks on the relation of literature and society which may have some relevance in this connection. 'The age in which the author is born may write itself in his work . . . The spirit of the age works in the author whether he knows it or not . . . The spirit of the modern age has inevitably influenced the author of *Ghare-Baire*, and, of course, the novel shows the influence. But the influence belongs to the purely artistic plane, and the writer has no concern with the good or evil effects of what he writes. He is concerned only with art, and if the reader chooses to invest him with some other concern, it is really the reader's own and the writer should not be saddled with its responsibility.<sup>1</sup> Its characters and

<sup>1</sup> *Sabujpatra*, Agrahāyan, 1322 B.S.



situations reveal a precise and clear attitude towards certain basic questions of life in a given situation in a given time and at a given place. By his own admission and in the light of his whole life and work, the reality of every situation is in the cognisance of his 'person', and the full understanding of it in the experience of the self-same 'person'. His attitude and approach, therefore, to the situations and characters of the novel have to be regarded as an integral part of his evolving total view of life which indeed is articulated in it. In fact Tagore's personal experience and artistic experience are one and the same; this is the clear reading of his whole life and work.

The plot of *Ghare Baire* is very simple and straightforward. There are only three characters in it. Nikhileś is a noble, high-principled idealist, a member of the then Bengal's landed gentry, who has a rare religious insight and political wisdom enriched by a wide tolerance and deep humanism. His friend, Sandip, is a crude and selfish windbag, a cheap patriot, voluptuous and unscrupulous. And then there is Nikhileś's wife, Vimalā, who is a real and vital woman but not so subtle, intelligent or sensitive as to understand and appreciate her anaemic husband, yet not so crude and unscrupulous as to submit to the lure of the coarse overtures of Sandip who succeeds, for a time, in playing the hero to her. Each one of them narrates in an autobiographical manner the external and inner situations of life and thinking in which they go on finding themselves, and as they do so they move the story forward to a logical end. The language of sophisticated spoken word in urban upper middle-class society contributes to the tempo of the action and to the direct and immediate impressions of the situations and characters. There is, therefore, more drama, more flexibility and variety of rhythm. The Bengali spoken language is particularly suitable for epigrams, and the clinching, epigrammatic sentences give brilliant zest to the clash of arguments and ideals, of which the characters and dialogues are full. The heroes of the national movement were animated with a maddening zeal which is very successfully transmitted to the characters, and this adds to the impetus of the action. In a parallel manner the action itself is so impetuous that the characters are caught up in its current and swept on to an inevitable conclusion.

Obviously Tagore makes Nikhileś the champion of a new

ideal of husband-wife relation. Nikhileś scorns to exercise the easy and limitless authority which Hindu marriage gives the husband over the wife. His vow is to make himself worthy of his wife's love, and win her in life in competition with others. Sandip turns up as rival. But is he in any real way a match for Nikhileś? The *Swadeshi* movement uprooted many an individual, produced thousands of men who acted and spoke exactly like Sandip, left their families and plunged into the storm and clash of the movement. But not all were unscrupulous and greedy crooks like Sandip. Why could not the author place one of them in Sandip's situation, one with whom Vimalā could have worthily fallen in love and who would have honestly returned her love? The problem would then have taken a turn in different direction, and the solution presented in the novel might also have been different. Again, such solution as is offered (which in no way proves the validity of Nikhileś's ideal, for it is not Nikhileś's love but other things that restore Vimalā) remains unsatisfactory. Can this measuring of Nikhileś with such a crook and a cad as Sandip give a conclusive verdict? Sandip is so obviously a mean skunk that any decent man would shine by comparison. If he had been a better man, would the story have ended the way it does!

Yet the fact remains that Nikhileś, despite his idealism, his high principles and his detachment, is an anaemic and unconvincing figure, and Sandip, his friend and protégé, despite his unscrupulousness, his shameless sensuality and seductive heroism, is the most colourful and convincing character in the novel. Sandip is indeed the hero of the story. That Vimalā fell for him was no fault of hers; that she did not get herself burnt in the flame is a grace that was visited on her by the author himself through an arrangement of situations that could have been otherwise. But the author succeeds, and succeeds amazingly well, in doing what he wanted to do, that is, in laying bare the moral weakness of our political ideals and actions, the small indignities and inhumanities that lie hidden under tall and loud claims. One only wishes the character of Nikhileś, whom the poet set up to hold aloft his cherished ideal of broad humanism and of conjugal love, were more real and convincing.

Apart from his stupendous activities in so many creative fields, the amount of Tagore's expository and other writings in this period is also prodigious. It is simply astonishing how he got the time and the energy to do all that he did! Not only was he creative in poetry and drama and music, in the novel and short story, not only did he produce and direct plays; he also wrote, in the same period, a large number of essays and addresses on a variety of subjects—on culture and education, on religion and philosophy, on politics and nationalism, on language and music and prosody; then, he kept a diary of his extensive travels, and even wrote several text-books for the boys and girls of his *āśrama*-schools. As if all these were not enough, for he had started writing serious prose in English. In 1912, he had completed a series of essays, which were later delivered as lectures at Harvard University and published as *Sādhana* (The Realisation of Life, 1913). In 1917, were published *Nationalism and Personality*, which contained his lectures and addresses in Japan and the United States in 1916; and, in 1922, was published *Creative Unity* containing his occasional essays and some lectures delivered abroad.

Such travels and sojourns, extended or short, were undertaken as many as four times during this period: in Japan and the United States in 1916-17; in Europe, England and the United States in 1920-21; in Malay and China in 1924; and in South America and Italy, also in 1924 towards the end of the year. Thrown in in the intervals were two long tours in the southern states of our country, one in 1919 and another in 1922. Apart from the lectures and addresses he delivered at the various places he visited, and apart from the large number of men and women, including writers, thinkers and artists that he met and held discussions with, a considerable part of these travels and sojourns was taken up by his attempts at collection of funds for his school at Santiniketan which had become a great financial worry to the poet. Wherever he happened to be, his mind and heart were ever directed to his nest at Santiniketan to which he always came back to find rest, peace and solace and to draw inspiration for his poetry and song. And then, after some time when he would feel that his nest was swallowing him up and becoming



'jealous' of his attentions to other places, he would once more spread his wings and fly to distant parts of the world. For the rest of his days until he would be so old and infirm as to be unable to move about, this will be the pattern of his life.

It is not possible to make any detailed reference to his essays, addresses and letters written during this period, important though they are, for they show the evolution of his prose style, his ideas on a variety of subjects and his reactions to the contemporary issues of life and society. Many of these ideas and reactions are reflected in the creative works of the period and need not be discussed here again. One such essay on 'Freedom of Music' (1917) I have already referred to. In the same year, that is, in 1917, Tagore wrote another significant essay on the contemporary socio-political situation in India, under the title *Kartār Ichhāy Karma* (As the Master Wills It), to which a reference must be made, since it sets the tone of many similar essays. Written in dignified prose and in stately rhythm and harmony it is as much an ironical indictment of British policy in India, as of our helplessness and frustration and the general attitude of political mendicancy of our leaders. Education was another subject in which the poet had always been deeply interested. Not long after 'As the Master Wills It', he wrote a devastating satire, *Totākāhini* (The Parrot's Training, 1918), on the educational policy and methods of our Government.

Letters written by Tagore at different periods of his life throw considerable light on certain aspects of his life and personality, and he wrote a countless number of them, of which only a fraction has yet seen the light of day. He was an untiring and inveterate letter-writer, and it is doubtful if there was anyone who could say that he had written him a letter and did not get a reply, and this even when Tagore was in the height of his fame. Among the thousands of letters that he must have written throughout his life, there is one class that may not have been originally meant for record or publication but is, nevertheless, of public interest, inasmuch as it records his ideas and opinions on the issues of public importance—literary, social, political, religious or philosophical—of national and international significance. Such letters are documents of the history of his life and thought and of his evolution as a writer, thinker and man of action, an aspect of his life and personality which is

recorded elsewhere, too, in his creative and analytical works. The letters that he wrote during his travels in Europe or in Japan or, later, from Southeast Asia also belong to this category of public letters or diaries. But there is another series which was not originally meant for publication and was therefore informal in tone and character, which one may label as personal and private, since there is always an under-current of intimately sweet personal relationship with the addressees running through them. Such is the bunch of letters he wrote to his niece Indira (called Bob in the letters) in the nineties of the last century, which I have already referred to more than once. Similar bunches, lean or fat, were written to many others in later life, after he was past fifty-five (*Bhānusiṃha's Patrāvālī*, Letters of Bhānusiṃha, 1930, for instance, written to a young girl who later on came to be known as Lady Ranu Mookerjee, or the bunch of more than 500 letters he wrote to Srimati Nirmal Kumari Mahalanobis). Letters of this nature served very well as an effective means of expressing his personal and private musings and thoughts, his dreams and visions on a variety of things that interested him for the time being. The persons written to, generally young girls, were hardly anything more than pegs to hang on his flitting ideas, visions and musings, and this satisfied his inner urge for expression and communication. These letters afford a clear view of one side of his personal life as lived from day to day outside of his family environs, in the twenties and thirties of this century. What emerges before our eyes is the image of a man aging gracefully, with an abundant but almost impersonal affection, with a loving but detached outlook on life, with a gentle calm, and a light philosophical approach to men and things, with a rich fund of genial humour and a sweet grandfatherly indulgence for all men and women.

But, then, there is an earlier series of private letters written in his early and later youth, first to his wife, son and daughters; secondly, to the teachers and other inmates of the Santiniketan *āśrama*; and, thirdly, to other members of his family on matters connected with the management of family estates. There is also another bunch written to his close personal friends like Jagadis Chandra Bose, Priyanath Sen, and Srishchandra Majumdar, on matters literary, religious and otherwise. The last category,

important as it is, concerns primarily his creative life and thought, his kindness, charity and humanity. But the other three rear up an image of his personal life that one does not get elsewhere. Here we find in young Tagore a most affectionate and dutiful husband giving lessons in very affectionate terms to a much younger wife who comes from poorer and much less cultured environs, and who is engaged in her wifely duties in a large family with an altogether different set of values, traditions, environs and culture; we find him telling her how to feed and nurse a sick child, or how to prepare a particular diet or how to administer a particular medicine. Later, Tagore taught her how to mother the number of boys and girls that became her charge at the Santiniketan *āśrama*-school, how to sacrifice her personal belongings, including her ornaments, for them. Here was the husband that kept vigils round the clock for two months when the wife took to bed never to rise again. It is the same image of a fond, affectionate and dutiful person, on this instance, of a father, that emerges from the letters to his children, yet when three of them died before they were grown up, the unfortunate but disciplined father maintained his equanimity and went on with the busy chores of day-to-day life and activity.

The same strong sense of duty and attention to details characterise the letters that he wrote to the teachers and other inmates of the Santiniketan *āśrama*-school, and to the members of his family on estate matters. In the former series, he goes on expounding patiently his ideals of education, the way in which he wants to see them put into practice, what should be the daily routine, the teaching method and the entertainments of the young inmates, their food and dress and everything that concerns and affects them. A boy falls ill, and he feels worried and writes immediately to a teacher what should be done about his nursing and treatment, and he goes in each case into the minutest of details. In the management of the family estates he was the model indeed of a paternal landlord deeply concerned with the welfare of the tenants, but when it came to the question of retention of the interests of the dwindling family fortunes against the unjust claim of other competing interests, he could be tough and unbending. Yet here was the man who invested a large part of the family income and even of



his Nobel Prize money in a rural co-operative bank and other idealistic projects of national significance that went down the drain and left him all but bankrupt.

Here was also the man who had himself been constantly running into debts, selling his personal belongings, including the copyright of his books, and going through intense financial struggles, all because of the great burden that his *āśrama*-school had come to be, and begging of the idle rich to help a friend, Jagadis Chandra Bose, for instance. These letters are indeed revealing documents for an insight into the person that Tagore was in his early and late youth.

## 7

As if all the literary activities, tours in his own country and travels round the world, and the worries and work for his *āśrama*-school were not enough, he was all the time allowing himself to be drawn into politics and public life. The affairs of his country and people were moving, irresistibly it seems, in a direction that does not seem to have left any alternative, for a soul as sensitive as his, but to be drawn into the politics.

In 1915, Tagore had his first meeting with Gandhi at Santiniketan, through the instrumentality of their common friend Charles Freer Andrews. This meeting led to the beginning of that close and intimate friendship between the two, which, despite their fundamental differences in outlook, discipline, temperament and ideology and occasional differences in opinion and method, remained unaffected and undisturbed till the last day of the poet's life. Their understanding of and respect for each other never wavered or failed.

In the meantime, his ideas on patriotism and nationalism, which were the dominant contemporary ideology of his people, were developing in his own personal matrix. The narrow, sectarian, aggressive and chauvinistic connotations, in which sense mainly these two words were understood, were being denounced by him, and for this he had already been earning severe condemnation from his own compatriots. His patriotism and nationalism, both informed by deep moral, human and spiritual values, were much above their understanding. Yet they were

all the time singing his patriotic songs, reciting his inspiring verses of patriotic sentiments, whenever and wherever there was the occasion. In 1917, when he wrote and read out his famous patriotic song,—'Thy trumpet calls have been sounded in distant lands, and heroes from afar have gathered round Thy throne. The day has come. But where is India? Does she hide herself behind the back of all persons? Remove her shame and give her, give her a place in the World of Man, O Lord ever awake!'—the entire audience was swept off their feet.

In the same year he read 'India's Prayer' at the inaugural session of the Indian National Congress, and that had the same electric effect. Not much later Mrs. Annie Besant was arrested and interned by the British rulers for her political activities in connection with the Home Rule movement. Tagore entered a fiery protest.

In the meantime, the politically conscious youth of Bengal, finding no channel of creative and constructive activity for the free flow of their resentments and frustrations, had gone underground, and had been making their existence felt in violent terroristic activities. Government repression was let loose and hundreds of patriotic youths mounted the gallows or were thrown into prison, or banished from the country for long terms, or sent into internment camps for indefinite periods. Tagore's sensitive soul was deeply disturbed, and, besides entering indignant protests, he took up, one after another, such cases for pleading with the ruling authorities as deserved better treatment on grounds of justice and humanity. When in 1918 Mr. Montagu, the then Secretary of State for India, came here to study the situation on the spot, Tagore wrote him a long letter explaining his approach to the problem of self-government for India. 'It is not flattering to us, and far less to the British rule in India, that after more than a century of Western domination we are still considered unfit to serve our country in its internal administration.' Nothing came out of Montagu's visit; instead, the British ruling authorities passed and set in motion a Black Act called the Rowlatt Act to suppress the national upsurge.

Gandhi had, meanwhile, made his choice; he now took the destiny of the nation in his hand and organised a movement in the form of civil disobedience. On 8 April, 1919, Gandhi was arrested; four days later Tagore wrote him an open letter

addressing him for the first time as *Mahātmā-jī*: '... Through panic or through wrath our authorities have shown us their claws ... In this crisis you as a great leader of men have stood among us ... you have come to your motherland in the time of her need ... to lead her in the true path of conquest ... Freedom can never come to a people through charity ... We must win it before we can own it.'

A day later, on 13th April, took place the savage massacre of the innocents in the Jallianwallah Bagh at Amritsar followed by the immediate declaration of Martial Law in the Panjab and its attendant atrocities of a most brutal and barbarous kind. When, after a few days, the news trickled through the solid wall of censorship and reached the poet, he lost his sleep and the calm and peace of his inner being to which he had disciplined himself for years. Not until he had written the now historic letter to the then Viceroy of India, renouncing his knighthood in order to 'give voice to the protest of millions of my countrymen surprised into a dumb anguish of terror', could he find the rest and calm to be able to go back to Santiniketan to compose songs, write plays and take classes.

But more painful days were in store for him, painful because things soon took such a turn that he could not help differing from one for whom he had the highest respect and admiration, and this one was Gandhi.

In July, 1921, Tagore came back home after an absence of about fourteen months in Europe, the United Kingdom, and the United States, and found India in the grip of a strong and broad-based movement of non-cooperation with the 'satanic' British government in India, led by Gandhi. The smouldering embers of frustration and resentment were transformed by him into a consuming flame. Tagore had heard about it all when abroad and knew whatever there was to be known about Gandhi's dramatisation of national self-help into the cult of the *charkhā* or the spinning wheel, his call for boycott of everything foreign, particularly Western. For Tagore who had been decrying the creed of chauvinistic patriotism and denouncing the ideology of narrow nationalism all over the world, and who was at this time conceiving the idea and preparing the plan for the establishment of the *Viśva-Bhāratī* 'where the world could meet in one nest', this seemed too much to bear with. Indeed he



found himself in complete disagreement with the inner logic and spirit of the movement. Against the whole force of the national upsurge he expressed himself in no uncertain terms in two successive papers, *Sikshār Milan* (The Meeting of Cultures) and *Satyer Ahvān* (The Call of Truth), in the course of which he rejected entirely the ideology of non-cooperation and the cult of the *charkhā*, and upheld the principle of moral and intellectual cooperation between India and the West.

Gandhi immediately published a rejoinder, which he entitled 'The Great Sentinel', explaining his point of view clearly and unequivocally. Andrews, their common friend, who had great regard and affection for both, must have felt deeply disturbed by this difference between the two great souls of India. He, therefore, brought about a meeting between Tagore and Gandhi at Santiniketan on 6 September, 1921. What transpired behind closed doors (the third person present was Andrews himself who never opened his mouth on the subject) nobody knows, but it seems that no agreement was reached, each maintaining his point of view; but they parted as friends. For the next three years Tagore did not make any worthwhile pronouncement on the contemporary Indian political life where Gandhi's voice was supreme. On 17 February, 1925 he came back home from another sojourn abroad, and soon after Gandhi came once more to see him at Santiniketan. Once again Tagore wrote another article to reiterate his attitude towards the cult of the *charkhā*. This time Gandhi kept silent. For the rest of his life Tagore too kept silent in so far as Gandhi's political activities were concerned, as, for instance, with regard to the Salt *Satyāgraha* movement. Each seems to have gone his own way, each maintaining his deep love and regard for the other.

## 8

The most important fact of Tagore's life and thought during this phase of his career that caused and conditioned his differences with Gandhi, was his increasing consciousness of the contemporary world situation of which the Indian was but a segment. The salvation of India of his dreams lay, in his opinion, in her working out an idea and a plan in which there should

be the closest moral, cultural and intellectual cooperation between India and the World, his nest and his sky. During this phase of his life he was indeed a world citizen without ceasing to be a citizen of India, and he was all the time thinking and living, physically and spiritually, as one who was trying to find a nest everywhere in the world and to bring the whole world in one nest that was his home. The Santiniketan *āśrama*-school could be that nest where India could meet the whole world and the world, India; it could be the centre where Indian culture could meet all other cultures of the world, where the East could meet the West. So was the *āśrama*-school of little boys and girls transformed into the *Viśva-Bhāratī*, a centre of world culture 'where the whole world meets in one nest' (*yatra viśvam bhavatyekanidam*). The idea was growing in his mind for some time past; he first explained this idea and plan to his colleagues at Santiniketan as early as 22 December, 1918, and since then he had been expanding some of the departments and adding new ones. Now three years later to the day, on 22 December, 1921, the *Viśva-Bhāratī* was formally inaugurated in the presence, among others, of the great Indian philosopher and savant, Brajendranath Seal, and the great French savant and orientalist, Sylvain Levi, the latter being the first Visiting Professor of the new world university. For the next three years of this phase as for the rest of his life, between his travels and in the midst of his intensive creative work, *Viśva-Bhāratī* continued to be his central concern, the main focus of his life, the spring of his vitality, the joy of his heart, the peace of his soul.

Tagore was now sixty-five. Had he grown old? Had he reached the goal he had been looking forward to? Had he reached the end of his explorations?

The answer is to be found in the life that he has coursed so far. Life's horizons are endless, its depths, and man's striving to probe into its mysteries know no end. This is what Tagore believed and his life was built on the solid foundation of this robust faith. Therefore life has still more and more to offer, farther distant horizons to explore. He cannot afford to grow old or infirm till nature asserts herself.

The next phase of his life will show how far this was true.

## 9. New Life : New Flowers and Fruits

1926-1937

As if to prove that the nest of the *Viśva-Bhārati* could not hold for long the winged bird that yearned for the limitless sky, Tagore went out, in May 1926, on his eighth foreign tour and sojourned in various countries of Europe, and in Egypt and Turkey; he came back towards the end of the year. Barely seven months later, in July 1927, he travelled for about four months round the islands and countries of Southeast Asia. Two years later, in 1929, he was out again—this time to Canada, the United States and Japan. In the following year (1930), he was once more on wings, to Western Europe, from where he went to Russia, and from there to the United States. He came back home after about a year. In 1932, he visited Iran and Iraq for about two months and, in 1934, Ceylon for a short while. That was his last sojourn abroad. In most of the places he visited, he met writers, artists, intellectuals, students, politicians, etc; he delivered addresses on a variety of subjects, such as the culture and civilisation of the East and the West, nationalism, education, art, literature, religion and philosophy; and he held exhibitions of his paintings and drawings, which had now become a strong passion with him. At home, too, he was somewhat restless, partly because he could not stay fixed at one place for long (even at the Santiniketan *āśrama*, he used to change his residence very frequently), and partly because the *Viśva-Bhārati* was always short of funds, and he had to go out to collect them. And, then, there was always the countless demands made on a public figure of his stature, which he could not avoid. In 1926 he went round on a tour of a few districts of eastern Bengal; in 1927 to Jaipur, Agra, Ahmedabad and later to Shillong; in 1928 to Pondichery, Madras and Bangalore; in 1931 to Bhopal; in 1932 to Poona; in 1933 again to Poona and to Waltair; in 1934 to Waltair again and to Madras and Banaras; in 1935 again to Banaras, Allahabad and Lahore. In 1936 he proceeded on a north Indian tour for collecting funds for the *Viśva-Bhārati*,



via Patna and Allahabad to Delhi, where Gandhi stopped him, secured a handsome donation to his cause and urged on him not to expose himself at that age to such strenuous work. Tagore obeyed him. For the rest of his days he did not move out of Bengal except only once, in 1937, when, for reasons of health, he spent about a month at Almora. Most of the tours in India he undertook either in search of funds for the *Viśva-Bhāratī*, which was to him a constant financial worry, or in response to invitations to deliver lectures at universities, at institutions of learning and at functions of public importance. For fund-raising he would take out his Santiniketan troupe of singers, dancers and other artistes and give performances; the other method of raising funds was to deliver lectures.

Meanwhile, whenever he happened to be in Calcutta or at Santiniketan, demands on his time and energy were equally pressing. He would be delivering lectures, teaching, receiving honours, performing public duties of national importance, and receiving an unceasing flow of visitors, which included great and small leaders of people, artists, poets and writers, thinkers and intellectuals, students, devout men and women, and loose-heads of all sorts; all this kept him extremely busy. This went on so long as his aging bones could bear, that is, until the middle of the year 1940, barely one year before those bones were turned into ashes. Even during the early months of 1940, he went out twice on public calls, once to Suri, the district headquarters of Birbhum, to open an Industrial Exhibition, and again to Bankura, to lay the foundation stone of a maternity home and child-welfare centre.

One of the pleasurable, yet necessary (because of the ever growing financial demands of the *Viśva-Bhāratī*) things that he did frequently when he was in Calcutta or at Santiniketan, was the rehearsing and staging of his plays, and numbers of them were performed during this time, in which the poet himself played a leading role on the stage. But in the last three years or so of his life he could do it no longer, and then he continued to supervise the rehearsals and to appear on the stage, just being content to sit at one side or corner.

The human situation at home and abroad, too, kept him disturbed and his attention engaged from time to time. During his tour in Italy (1926), where he was feted like a king by

Mussolini and his government, he had hardly any opportunity to have a look at the unmasked face of Fascism; but when he was in Zurich and later in Vienna in the course of this tour, he came to have first-hand accounts of Fascist barbarities in Italy, and then he sent an indignant letter to the *Manchester Guardian*, expressing himself strongly and unequivocally against Fascism. Back home in 1927, he saw government repression let loose on the political workers of Bengal, and once more, feeling deeply disturbed, he issued a dignified statement protesting against political detention without trial under the Bengal Ordinances. Three years later, in 1930, when he was in England, news reached him of the continued repression of political workers and their activities, in India. He was obliged to give an interview to the same *Manchester Guardian* in which he protested very strongly against measures adopted by the 'irresponsible bureaucratic' government. There he also discussed Indian affairs with the leading members of British Government and wrote another letter to the *Spectator* on the political situation in India, paying a remarkable tribute to Gandhi and his wise leadership. When he came back home a year later, Bengal was still seething with discontent consequent on the political repression and inhuman treatment of political prisoners. There was an outrageous shooting on an unarmed group of them at the detention camp at Hijli in Midnapore, leading to the murder of two young souls. Once more the poet came out of his retreat to preside over a mammoth public meeting in which he gave an eloquent expression to the deep anguish of millions of people. The cause of the unfortunate political prisoners was very near to his heart and he lost no opportunity to take up their cause, to plead and fight for them as he did later also in 1933. Earlier he had sent his greetings in a poem to the prisoners in another detention camp at Buxa. In January 1932 Gandhi was arrested and Tagore immediately cabled to protest to the British Prime Minister, and when somewhat later Gandhi undertook a 'fast unto death' in protest against the communal award, the poet ran to his side at the Yervada prison. As Gandhi broke his fast the poet sang a song which became with that great leader of men one of his most favourite songs. A little while ago, he was engaged in collecting funds for the flood-stricken in northern Bengal.

The above is intended to provide a dry skeleton idea of the

kind of activities in the external life that Tagore carried on when he was between sixty-five and seventy-five. It reveals an uncommonly busy and active life even for a man in the middle age. But Tagore was, from his early youth, wedded to the affairs of men and the world, committed to the cause of humanity's march to freedom, progress and peace on all fronts. A spirit of this description can find no rest; one who does not seek deliverance through renunciation, one who wants to taste freedom in the countless bonds of human life, can have no ivory tower to escape to. Again and again he wants to get away from the strifes and struggles of everyday life (he has recorded this feeling in a number of poems and songs) and to serve none else but his muse, to be guided only by his inner urges and inclinations, but when for a time he does so, he frets and chafes and wants to get out into the wide world and join the fray in which humanity is involved. Politics, as commonly understood, he abhorred; yet he had to take part in it when it came to the basic questions of justice and humanity. He took little fancy to travels and public life, but he was obliged to be drawn into both by a social conscience which, if not so strong and imperative as the call of his muse, was nevertheless very keen and sensitive. Such was his character and personality. Personally I feel that it is this play between the two streams of urges—between the call of social consciousness and the call of his muse, between the world of actualities and the world of ideas, between vision and imagination, between the body and the spirit, between the personal self and the universal self—that constitutes Tagore's personality. And it is this over-all play or *līlā* that lends charm and colour to the artist in life that Tagore was.

There is yet another aspect of the urges of the poet's external life inasmuch as they afforded him the opportunity to experience and realise life in wider dimensions and greater depths than would have been possible otherwise. Such experience and realisation immensely enriched his inner life and helped to nourish his muse by imparting to them both ever-glowing colour and ever-renewing vitality. Otherwise it is difficult to explain how the poet, seemingly and admittedly approaching the final scene of his life's drama as he states in many a poem in 'The Evening Melody' or 'The End', actually opens another chapter, new and vital, in which are reflected experiences and realisations of a



new world of men and things. In this new chapter are also featured new experiments, new forms of expression, new human and social situations, new drama and visions and a new interpretation of life and death. The great *Vanaspati*, lord of the forest, seems to have had a rejuvenation; it seems to bring forth a new and fresh crop of flowers and fruits. It is to these that we must now turn.

## 2

*Parīśesh* (The End, 1932), the first volume of poems to be published after *Mahūā* (a strongly scented flower, 1929), and *Vanavānī* (The Message of the Forest, 1931), seems to convey by its title the idea that the curtain was drawn upon the final act of the drama of his life. Actually, the poems in *Parīśesh* herald the beginning of a new phase of the poet's life and art, perhaps one of the richest and most significant of all the phases of his life. And this when he was past three score and ten. As if it were a rebirth, but one with all the rich experiences of previous existences stored in the memory and consciousness of his new being.

At the end of every phase, once he had passed forty, we have heard the poet say that he was nearing the end of his days, that he had nothing more to offer, and that he was singing his last song. In *Kheyā* (The Ferry, 1906) and *Puravī* (The Evening Melody, 1925), for example, are played the notes of such 'last songs.' Yet, the wonderful *Vichitrā* (literally, the Multi-coloured One, 1933) soon got hold of him and put him again on the endless track. Again she made him retract his farewell, as it were, and prepared him for new experiences. So subtle are the ways of his goddess that the poet himself is not conscious of it; he himself muses that 'his pilgrimage is coming to an end and death is casting shadow in the western sky'. So, in astonishment he asks the gooddess; 'Why have you come with your basket when I have nothing more to give and the day is over? Will you then take away from me all I have, and leave me utterly without possession?' And this 'last offering', which leaves him without a possession, is *Parīśesh*.

*Parīśesh* is, by and large, the poetry of self-analysis, of self-

exploration. Holding up before himself his whole life of seventy years, he realises once more that he is a poet, that his task is to drink in the world's joys and beauties and transmit them to others, to record in poems and songs the joy and pain of his awareness of life. In the poem 'Vichitrā' he makes a scrutiny, as it were, of his own nature, of himself as a poet, of his life's course and history. In a series of wonderful poems he tells us how Vichitrā, the goddess of his life, has continued to guide and transform him through experience after experience. Perhaps the poet thinks that, since he has reached 'his life's west where death's shadow is thick and dark', he should take a stock of himself, come to some sort of settlement with his God and with his own divided heart, and dedicate all that has some worth in his seventy years' achievement to the God of the universe. This argument with the various moods and modes of his soul goes on in poem after poem, and in the course of this dialectic a very old experience comes back to him. His deep love of life and the earth received fresh strength and inspiration; the secret of life that is at the centre of the universe, touches the poet in him anew with its refining fire and quickens in him with a new surge of inspiration. In this new freedom the bonds and obligations of his life so far chafe him. He wants to be rid of them so that he may 'pick the flowers that the wanton wind has blown hither in the dust, listen to the song that rings in the bird's nest, fill all his being with the life that unendingly course in the world'.

In poem after poem he communicates his deepest experiences and awareness of life. Once more he discovers that his mind and soul are with life, with the abundance of youth, with beauty and delight. Even now new life and new paths call out to him; we can hear their song in many a poem of *Parīkshā*. His God, wandering endlessly, has no shrine and no heaven. And the poet, too, 'travels ever forward with this God and comrade of his. In this ever forward journey is life's greatest and most ineffable treasure, there is glory in this dance of restless ecstasy.' This eternal traveller has no death. Death, when it comes down with its black thunder, comes down to the poet's own level, and so the poet does not fear him any more. Life therefore begins again. Ever young, ever listening to the song and tumult of new life and creation, how can the

poet come to the end of his life? Inevitably he has to recreate himself in *Punaścha* (The Postscript, 1932), his next volume of poems.

Some of the poems in *Parīśesh* are topical, inspired frankly by contemporary social and political events. Inside of India and outside, in China, Africa and Europe, a regime of terror and torment was let loose under which all human values were disappearing, and dark clouds of destruction were hovering all around. That the anguished soul of the poet would cry out in protest against such abject humiliation is no wonder. One such agonised cry came out in the form of superb poetry in the short piece 'A Question,' written a few days after the arrest of Mahatma Gandhi following the failure of the Second Round Table Conference in London. Not very long before had taken place the brutal assault on, and the killing of, unarmed political prisoners in the Hijli Detention Camp. Tormented beyond words, wounded to the depth of his being, the poet poses, in great despair and indignation, a big question before his God: 'You have sent your angelic messenger to the earth age after age, with your message of love and forgiveness. Today, when everything is dark around me, I have no use for your prophets; I can only offer my salutation and turn them away from my door. Have I not seen justice strangled by force from day to day, have I not seen the hapless child, ill-used and tortured, die in misery? My voice is choked today, my flute is silent, my world blotted out by a hideous nightmarish darkness. Oh, God, can you forgive those creatures who are darkening your light and poisoning your air? Can you love them?' This is a bare, very bare and feeble, summary of a pure, bitter, passionate and magnificent indignation expressed in choicest words and phrases, the tone raised up to the highest point of dignity and grandeur. Its brevity and compression heighten the total effect and make the content of indignation glow in the purity of its fire. But *Parīśesh* contains some poems of exultation too, in which the glory of life and beauty and youth is celebrated in tender and delightful music.

*Parīśesh* is followed by *Punaścha* (The Postscript), which, together with its three successors, *Śesh Saptak* (The Last Melodies, 1935), *Patrapuṭ* (Plate of Leaves, 1936), and *Śyāmali* (The Dark Green One, 1936), form somewhat of a group,



from the point of view of versification at any rate. Before taking up this group of publications, book by book, I propose, however, to disturb the chronological order and say a few words on at least one of the two books, *Vichitrā* (Illustrations, 1933) and *Vithikā* (The Avenue, 1935), that made their appearance in between. *Vithikā* contains a number of remarkable poems that afford a key to an understanding of the poet's life and work of this phase. They are also characterised by deep sentiment and immediate and unclouded emotion, emotion rooted in the poet's personal life yet having nothing private about it. The poet dares to explore the deepest and darkest levels of a being, and, although the answer to all his questioning is only a more mysterious question, he never loses his majestic serenity, his confidence that some day he will know the answers to all his questions. Whatever the immediate occasion, the substance of all the poems is a limitless exploration and revaluation of old ideals, imbibed and acquired. Everything—nature, love, life and death, universal life—provides an opportunity for this passionate revision and scrutiny, and this with a power of penetration hardly experienced before.

In the first poem the poet makes friends with the ageless past. In 'the land where shapes do not exist, where, at day, there is starlight,' the past reposes for ever in self-contemplation. There, the visible and sensuous world nearly disappears in the grey light of sunset and in this mysterious twilight the void and shapeless past weaves its shadows in the poet's mind. 'This void is not a desert, however, for it is permeated with soul, and life, as we know it with its unceasing cycle of destruction and creation, is only the fiery froth of this void as it whirls and eddies through eternity.' Into this land of life's forgotten night, forgotten but ever prolific, the poet gazes with a fixed eye; in its starry twilight which hushes and ends the fight between good and evil, the poet sits by his God.

Once in youth two beating hearts loved each other. Now they are quiet in the silence of life's sunset. But voiceless words seem to be shaking the lovers. Life is a huge and unintelligible spell, in which the whole story of their life and love does not take more than two lines. Have they seen into them, known their riddle at last? And the poet prays that his heart may for ever beat in the love of this bride who has come to him in

the dark shape of night, that all his vain, wild, life-long struggles to achieve uncertain ends may come to a stop in this cadence of love. He prays that his union be untroubled and quiet, that its infinite symphony fill night's dark shrine with slow and grand music.

In this universe there is a silent void on the one side, a void beating with form and soul which the poet aspires to reach and know. On the other side is the darkness of annihilation which is also another void. From this latter one, the poet's soul shrinks. This one begets darkness and distance and difference; its shadowy and uncertain images cloud the poet's consciousness; the glare from its sky makes even familiar and pleasing unfamiliar and frightful. Shutting out the path before him, it points out another which has no end, which only lures him to the silent and gloomy cave where the pole star's light does not reach. The monster that rules this void brings annihilation, the muddy bubbles that it churns up from its dominion of chaos, soil and shut out all created forms: its harsh notes drown the music of words and by robbing them of their meaning make them poor and hideous. In earth's dark and blind and silent depths it prepares the tomb of freedom with the stone that human hands cannot remove. And the poet, yearning for form and freedom and radiance, how can he desire to be buried in this dark musicless prison? The silent void ever beating with God's imagination and creation on the one side, and barren emptiness and darkness that strangle on the other: these two are irreconcilable opposites. With this sterility and this death the poet can have nothing to do.

But the abundance, the diversity and the movement of life do not hold any charm for him any more; he rather longs for the quiet, absorbed and silent intensity of contemplation. For the poet now has a vision of life's deepest mystery, a mystery that few can read or see although it spreads everywhere.

In one poem death casts a dark and hitherto unfamiliar shadow. Unfamiliar, because it is not a passing thought merely but has a terrifying intensity, as if the poet has met death face to face, has known all its horror and torment in his own life. Such an experience has come to him for the first time, the experience of the body receding, loosening the embrace of the past and all its defeats and sorrows and delights. As the body

thus recedes, his soul, his essential self, is left alone; but here the terror ends however. His soul is left alone to float in the stream of universal and absolute life, and in the glory of its radiance death loses its darkness. Death is not finally dark, therefore, for it transmits to him the fount of light which is eternal. In another poem he says that, when drowsiness overcomes body and soul, consciousness is somehow transformed and the waking world becomes an illusion. The shapes that fill the void of sleep seem to be the reality. After we wake up, however, the world before us once more emerges as real, and the dream world fades into an illusion. When death awakens the poet to a new life, will he then wake up to the fact that the awareness of this no-life which is the real life existed in his mind when he was alive?

*Punaścha* (The Postscript), published in 1932, mark the beginning of a new flowering. It was followed by *Śeṣa Saptak* (The Last Melodies) in 1935 and by *Patrapuṭ* (Plate of Leaves) and *Śyāmālī* in 1936. These four books contain what is called 'prose-poems', and have thus a formal unity of a sort.

In the structural, architectonic pieces of *Balākā* (Geese in Flight, 1916), the poet had already worked out a verse form which has a disciplined harmony of its own expressed in its internal rhythms, metrical mastery, and regularly recurrent stresses. By the prolongation of the syllables, rhymed or unrhymed, and by discarding the unit system of eight and six of the traditional Bengali verse form, he imparted to the verse a great freedom and flexibility, which ultimately was responsible for the great vitality that informs the *Balākā* poems. But the poet did not stop there. In *Palātākā* (The Fugitive, 1918) he introduced pauses and the variations of stress of the spoken Bengali, which gave more freedom to the verse form. The next step was taken in *Lipikā* (Sketches, 1922), which was written and printed in prose form but should be taken as verse. Here the form is improved upon by devising a careful pattern of inner rhythm and a subtle modulation of tone and voice according to the meaning of the words and phrases. These gains in verse form are taken up and fully exploited in the poems in *Parīṣeṣa*, and in those in his last three works, *Rogasayyāy* (From the Sick-bed, 1940), *Ārogya* (Convalescence, 1941) and *Śeṣa Lekhā* (The Last Poems, 1941). But a greater experiment still was in store.



From *Balāka* onwards he was steadily moving towards more and more freedom and flexibility, towards an increasing synthesis of verse and prose. This process led inevitably to what we call the prose-poems in *Punaścha*, *Śesh Saptak*, *Patrapuṭ* and *Śyāmali*, a verse form by means of which the logical and precise statements of prose are woven into the web of verse.

Form is not something adventitious but is the body of poetry. Its connection with the poet's imagination, experience and sensibility is, therefore, intimate. In *Balākā* the modulation of song that removes the verse to a sphere away from factual language, persists in the verse. The poet now believes that poetry should be completely free from all suggestion of song: it should have the rigid and integrated texture of prose, should have its logical coherence and precision of statement, and with all this, the quality of poetry, so that it is able to evoke passionate responses. Since the whole emphasis thus falls primarily on content the harmony of prose metre naturally does not depend on the modulations of sound but on those of meaning and idea; it is internal and not external. The verse technique of *Balākā* and *Palātakā*, of *Lipikā* and *Parīśesh* proves that it has an organic history and evolution. But a more important fact is that the poet has entered upon a new spiritual phase, and a new phase naturally carves out a distinctive form and technique. The transformation is more actual and widespread. There is not only a newness of content, such as we find in *Punaścha*, there is a radical re-orientation of the whole sensibility, attitude and perspective.

The poet has often tried to explain the aim and significance of this new technique, and he himself has stated that underlying all this there was a total and compulsive change of phase too. In the introduction to *Punaścha* he says that the coyness and the excessive burden of trinkets that has so long impeded the movement of poetry must be broken down; it must be given the same freedom of motion as prose has. 'The adoption of a full-hearted and unashamed prose technique will enlarge the rights and privileges of poetry, that was the faith that inspired me in this strange innovation. Some of the poems have poetic notes although they are unrhymed, but even in them I have discarded all conventional poetic language.'

In the second poem in *Punaścha* he narrates how prose arrives

in his poetry with a haphazard baggage of beauty and ugliness, of all sorts of wild and confusing objects, and sets up a deafening turmoil of shouts and screeches and musical notes. 'The empire of prose had reached a towering height; sometimes it breathed fire and sometimes it let down waterfalls.' Again, 'only a really powerful man can conquer this continent of prose-poems' 'for its tracks are rough and uneven, and it is so difficult to keep steady'. This verse form is, as the poet says, 'a blend of thunder and music, of the rugged and the soft, of fire and fountain, of the rough and the smooth'. We see it at its best in the long and profound poems in *Śeṣh Saptak* and *Patrapuṭ*. What the poet's attitude is one can see clearly in the first two poems in *Punaścha*.

Not only is he eager to write the language of ordinary men and women, his sensibility, too, is eager to embrace the larger human consciousness. This newness of perspective comes out even more clearly in the third poem in *Punaścha*, 'New Times'. So he begins anew, 'in a different language from heretofore: the language of tramps, the raw accents that we hear in wayside inns'. The idea is expressed even more clearly in a few poems in *Śeṣh Saptak*. In one of them the poet 'holds his court under the sky by the dusty wayside, and as he turns over the pages of his older books, the poems seem to be supersensitive, they seem to be too subdued, too coy; indeed, they appear to be so fragile that if they leave the cool shadows of their harem and come out into the open, the sunlight will at once shrivel them up. How can he present them at this court? Here only can come those who have left home, whose clothes are dusty, who can walk steadily and sturdily even in the most difficult road, who do not have to please any one and who can shout lustily in dark forests and strange hills.' It is for them and of them that the poet wants to sing his new song. So the old poetry remains unread, and the poet goes away saying that he will 'tread difficult roads, do strenuous journey,' so that one day he may sing the 'harsh songs of an indifferent and sturdy soul'.

In another poem the poet describes his new poems thus: 'they are the dancing girls on leave, and so they dance in what steps they like, sing in what measures they please. Sometimes they sing sweetly, sometimes raucously. They laugh madly and uncontrollably, wear careless and coarse garments. You can never

hold them in your grip.' The earlier poems, says the poet, 'are aristocratic, confined to a severe system of manners and etiquette'; 'the later poems on the other hand remind one of the shrubs outside the garden wall, full of haughty and fiery blossoms trying to hold themselves erect under the sky, free from cares and fetters and yet somehow full of an intrinsic purity, a superb and beautiful discipline.'

Clearly the poet thinks that those for whom he has sung so long are only a small segment of the larger humanity. He has not spoken the language of the common people, has not sung their notes. Yet, it is to them, he thinks, the times ahead belong. So, today poetry 'must be made of the stuff of their language, their feeling, their passion. Naturally, it must be naked, stripped of all ornament, of all necessary graces and frills; it must be strong and bare and free.' Here, then, is not only a great change in verse form but a greater and more significant change in sensibility and perspective, as well as in his aim and objective as a poet. It will now be increasingly clearer that he had attained to a more heightened social consciousness which results in the widening horizon of subjects, themes and content of his poetry. More. It results in the innovation of a new form of poetry which opens up new avenues of human expression. The prose poems have a significance as poetry which, indeed, we cannot ignore, we cannot imagine them written in another mode. They have an organic coherence of form and content; the intense passion, the vast imaginative range, the majestic vision that they embody are all of a piece with the prose technique, and this synthesis cannot be broken up without breaking up a whole poem. These poems could not have been written without the hard strength, the free and irregular modulation, the clarity and precision of meaning that only the prose form could import. It has been a wonderful achievement to incorporate in this prose medium the even and ceaseless roll that is the quality of verse when it is vibrant with emotion.

Even more wonderful, however, is the clear and bright radiance, the swelling and majestic movement, the accents rhythmic with power that we find in the best of these prose-poems along with their tremendous imaginative vitality and integrity. Most of the poems in these four volumes describe apparently trifling events or expand thoughts and imaginations that are in



origin only casual. But however minute or trivial the immediate theme may seem to be, it is a part of the events and emotions of daily life; it has thus a serious and passionate background without which it is incomplete. The poet takes keen pleasure in all that happens around him and relates it to a larger significance, a significance which is composed of the same mixture of the harsh and the sweet, the hard and the soft. There are certain poems which tell stories, and they are composed in the lambent and detached mood proper to the story-telling vein. In other poems again there is an attempt to recapture in everlasting beauty and depth some sudden and flitting whim or desire. In such poems the feeling naturally flows at a low ebb, the movement of the sensibility is undirected and uncontrolled and therefore full of sudden and unexpected turns and shifts: the attitude as a whole is somewhat indifferent, detached. Yet they have a beautiful integration of form and feeling, a firm correspondence of word and meaning and music.

Love sometimes comes in some of these poems. But the poet's purpose is not to explore this passion but to tell a story. To be sure there are many love poems in these four volumes, but they do not have much intensity; both passion and expression are somewhat light; on the whole it is a passion that is quiet and soft and assured, a kind of passion that the poet prefers and treats of in lovely language and imagery.

Some are inspired by meditation: meditation on the universal realities, on the poet's own life. The energy of self-concentration, the directness of thought and emotion that they have are unparalleled. Equally unsurpassed are the depth and clarity of vision that they reflect in beautiful, pure and majestic language.

Many poems in *Śesh Saptak* contain intimate reflections on the poet's personal life. In fact, if we want to have any real and deep understanding of Tagore's mind and personality we cannot do without the poems that he wrote during this phase of his life. They have almost documentary significance, especially those included in the volumes that were published during the last few years of his life. Standing on the verge of life, the poet takes stock of his own achievements, of the whole development of his spirit. The self-exploration and analysis, although so complex and many-sided, are nowhere foggy or confused. The poems he wrote on his birthdays are full of this self-analysis;

but we get it in other poems too; for example, in the last three poems in *Sesh Saptak* and in numbers 3 and 12 in *Patrapuṭ*, the last two having a deeper vision, a greater imaginative range and meaning. No quotation can give any idea of the majesty and integrity, the ever-present power that inform these poems.

In the forty-third poem in *Sesh Saptak*, the poet draws pictures of himself, of 'various Tagores' at various phases of life. After describing his splendid childhood, boyhood and youth, after describing the phase when he reached his plenitude, the poet, now past seventy, addresses his readers and says: 'You have come to me on this twenty-fifth *Vaiśākh* (the first month of the Bengali calendar), amidst all the harrowing troubles and conflicts of my life. Have you known that in my self-revelation there is much that remains unfinished, much neglected, torn and scattered? In your love, in your regard, in your forgiveness, you have fashioned an image of mine that is unstained by all this defeat and frustration. Let me acknowledge this as my true self, on this 25th *Vaiśākh*. And I bless you. I bequeath this beautiful and pure image to you to be treasured in your memory as I take my leave, although I do not boast that it will live for all time. You will now give me leave to depart. I will retire in that nameless solitude where shadow covers all life's reflections woven in black and white, and there at last I will learn to play all the instruments in unison with the music of the ultimate consummation.'

The pain of 'much unfinished, much torn and scattered, much neglected' ever troubles the poet in his last years. In poem number 12 in *Patrapuṭ* he says that as he sits on the shore of the river across which there is death, it seems to him that 'man goes on life's journey in order to find himself out. But although the man that sings has surrendered to my heart, I have not found the man that gives life. I have never known the man who can tear away life from the clutches of death, have never known his omnipotent heroism; so I depart with my poor and pale self, burdened with the misery of inadequate expression. When the trumpet blew my easy and pleasant life never abandoned its torpor in order to vibrate to the thrill of battle, never have I tried to find out my place among the fighting gods, never joined their battle. The trumpet's sound I have heard, but in my dreams only. For I stayed out from the struggle,

only my heart beat accordant with the marching feet. The light of the man who is born in every age of death and destruction shone dim in my being. I can only leave my respectful salutation to the hero that is adored in every human heart, the hero who has created this heaven on earth and paid for its glory in sorrow and death.'

Ever in nature Tagore has found an echo of his deepest self, so that absorption in nature has always been with him a way of absorption in the self. The delight and wonder of this experience have filled his adolescence and youth with rich sound and colour. Today, in life's evening, nature shows him the way to liberation from self. As we grow older our mental and spiritual vitality naturally decays, senility overtakes all our faculties and powers. Only nature can rescue us from this torpor and recall to us 'the bright and white light' that ever shines in life. In nature life flows perennially, with unwithering freshness; by making himself one with this flow man can keep his spirit above decay and death. And in life's last chapter this is how the poet saves his soul from descriptitude, and thus reaches peace and calm. This identification with nature is best seen in *Sesh Saptak* and in some of the poems in *Patrapuṭ* and *Śyāmālī*.

In every case the full realisation of nature consummates invariably in an equally full realisation of God. 'Life', he says in one poem, 'is a flux of impermanent things, but their thrill, as they live and die out, makes my soul shine and dance like the leaves of the *krishnachuda* tree. The moment is rich in gifts, although it is so short, and nothing clouds or distorts its truth. And I adore that darkness in which the creator of all forms broods. Nameless, he reveals himself in everlasting joy.' 'My naked soul', he says in another poem, 'is today overspread on the vastness of the universe. All that familiarity had soiled with its stained fingers, all that had been so long disfigured by the torn clothes of triviality, has cast off the smirch of familiarity and the worn out clothes, and shines before my eyes with wonder and glory. It is thus that the bride, about to fling herself on her dead husband's pyre, sees with new eyes, through death's tattered veil, the radiance of immortal life!' The 44th poem, on the poet's mud hut which he named *Śyāmālī*, has a mellow loveliness, the subdued calm and beauty of old age. The poet calls the house, in which he has settled to pass his last days,



*Syāmālī* because the earth of Bengal is green with luxuriance, because her daughters have in their eyes 'the green shade of the earth and the smooth glow of the green paddy plant'; because the earth has always called to him, from the banks of the *Padmā*, from the ponds and the mustard fields. So, 'in my last days I have answered your call, come home to your breast sweet with forgiveness.' How intense the poet's love for the earth is, how intense his pang at the thought that he will soon have to depart from it, can be seen in this as in many other poems. There is another poem on this mud hut, the last one in *Syāmālī*. This poem too is charmingly beautiful, bright with the glow of the undying life manifested in all brittle forms. The same inspiration, absorption in nature and realisation of the spirit through it, appears in two other poems in *Syāmālī*.

The fourth, seventh, eighth and tenth poems in *Patrapuṭ* are of this class, and they have a grander music, a more profound vision. Let me paraphrase one. The poet sees a yellow shrub, 'whose leaves are yellow-green and whose brown blossoms look like cups to drink light from. But the blossoms wither and the slight noise that they make as they drop off is drowned by the wind. The history of this flower's career is written in a corner of a very minute page by the universal recorder's minutest quill. Still, this trifling history unfolds an illimitable chronicle, too vast for the human eye, the chronicle of the ceaseless roll of the centuries that undulate like a prolonged chord, in the course of which mountains have been levelled and seas and deserts have changed places. The same blossom came floating down this torrent, with an ancient primeaval urge, the urge to bloom and wither. It used to bloom and wither in the past, of which no history exists, and since then epochs of creation and destruction have followed. Yet the tiny blossom with its unflinching, indomitable, determination to live and die persists, its last and completed picture yet undrawn. This bodiless resolve, this picture without lines—in what invisible being's thought do they exist eternally?' 'I too', the poet concludes, 'exist in the infinite and external imagination of that invisible being which holds in its sweep all human history, past and future.'

Many poems are inspired by deep spiritual questioning and speculation on humanity, on life and death, and are deeply significant. In these poems the poet's imagination towers in

sheer grandeur of majesty; there is no limit to the spiritual level that he penetrates and explores. The unparalleled spiritual power that belongs to the last two years of his life was attained when he was writing the prose-poems of this phase. Not that all of them quite come off as poetry, yet even the poems of slighter value have singular importance in the study of the poet's mind and personality.

In the thirty-sixth poem in *Sesh Saptak*, the poet reveals the echoes and suggestions of the universal spirit permeating and transcending the noise and bustle of daily life. Mostly we are unaware of this spirit's presence, but it exists always, 'touching the world from time to time with its magic wand and transmuting it into a beauteous dream. The glance of the beloved's eye, the music of the poet's song—do they not cleanse the dust of custom, light up life with a new and sudden glory? I do not know if these moments are preserved in some treasure house, but this I know that they came when I had forgotten my true self, they came and recalled me to the song sung unendingly in the heart of the universe in which they exist.' In the thirty-ninth and fortieth poems, the poet explores death with a new intensity and vision. Death keeps the stream of life unbroken; through death we see the radiance of undying life. Death's mystery touches three different circles: day and night which flit after a short existence, man's life lasting a few days only, and the almost eternal cycles of creation and destruction. In the twenty-first poem, death appears as another aspect of eternity. Two events appear in its vast background; both are impermanent, and the poet feels equal attraction for both. One event relates to the epochs of civilisation that flourish and then decline and pass into human history; in the solar system, too, planets suddenly appear and then disappear as suddenly in impenetrable darkness. What is their duration compared to the duration of eternity? At the depth of this cycle of birth and death it exists in undisturbed tranquility, and the poet yearns to reach it. The other event relates to the sudden bright moments in human life, moments of joy or sorrow: in the background of eternity their duration is even shorter. Yet, the poet says, they are truly immortal, inexhaustible in their light. And he feels an intense attraction for these evanescent moments. Stone monuments crumble to dust, but these rare precious moments live for ever, he says.

'This night in my bower, lighted up by the stars' sleepless eyes, I salute Eternity. What do I care for immortality? Let all our efforts for it vanish in the dust, like the toy held in the child's feeble grasp. For I possess the shining, immortal moments. And who can set a limit to their life? You cannot confine their endless truth even though you have thousands and millions of years. This epoch will end some day, and all the lamps will be blown out. The stage of creation will be dark. Then these moments will wait secretly, waiting for a new dawn.'

This passionate belief in the immortality of the single and individual emotions as against the emotionless and passionless existence of life as a whole, inspires the first poem in *Syāmali*. Most of the poems in this volume are lyrical, and it seems as if the poet's imagination went out and seized the seemingly trivial moments of human life as moments that were forgotten and were floating away in the air. Many poems in *Parīkṣh* and *Punālcha* also belong to this class. But these narrative lyrics are different from the verse tales in *Palātākā*, for they do not tell a complete story but only an episode, which however shines with all the glory and meaning that belongs to life as a whole. The poems are rich with the mature experience of a life-time, of a surpassing and indescribable peace that descends on the poet as he loses himself in these recollections of the past.

*Patrapuṭ*, written in the same technique, belongs to a far higher order of poetry. There is no lyricism, one of the sudden and glancing illuminations that we associate with it, but a different quality of massive and monumental grandeur. Like *Balākā*, its verse form is structural, architectonic. The poems are inspired not so much by emotion as by a vision in which passion and intellect are integrated, a vision of the organic and obscure laws, difficult to realise, that eternally inform life and the world, that are the secret principles of the separate impressions and experiences of life in all their variety. We can liken them to the stately murmur of huge trees in the forest of thought, the deep and reverberating throb of the conflicts and turmoils that agitate the human soul. Deep intellectual insight exists both in *Śeṣh Saptak* and *Bīthikā*, but in *Patrapuṭ* the realisation of the truths of life and death, interpenetrated with deep echoes from personal life and experience, has far deeper roots, and an incomparable grandeur of language and music. The poems are,



as it were, poetic versions of searching metaphysical essays written with life's blood. Their deep music echoes and re-echoes like the surge of sea waves. This organic, inner music, which no translation can recapture, is the true music of epic in prose-verse. Sheer prose can never have its modulation like that of the surging waves of the sea, their stately and majestic harmony; even the freest possible rhymed verse cannot have them. And *Patrapuṭ* shows the highest possible level that this technique can achieve, shows that there is no power and grandeur and beauty that cannot be reached by it. Indeed, Tagore has not written such noble and distinguished poetry since *Balākā*.

In September 1937 the poet fell seriously ill at Santiniketan. Death had been very near indeed, but not long after the poet came out of the 'pit of annihilation' and composed, among other things, eighteen unrhymed poems which were published under the title *Prāntik* (The Borderland, 1938). Sixteen of these deal with death and with life triumphant over death. In the preface the poet says: 'The sun now stands on the seashore of the west and sends its farewell song to the east.'

The title *Prāntik* is significant. Death's angel came into the poet's life with stealthy steps and conveyed him beyond 'the curtain that shuts out the world's light', not into the land of eternal darkness however, but to the estuary across which he could see another land of life. The all-conquering beams of light which radiate from eternal life, overthrow the darkness of death; the white light of consciousness illumines everything.

Death is a recurrent appearance in the poems of his last years. Ever since early youth the poet had been so intimate with death that he had all but lost the terror of it, but how could he know it in all its grandeur and all its light until he was physically face to face with it? Death's ever nearer approach subtly and imperceptibly modifies his sensibility, gives it a new power of penetration into death's mysteries, into life's mysteries too. His first face to face meeting with death in 1937 seems to have cleansed his soul, given it a new lustre and power and dignity. In his imagination he returns, again and again, to the experience of death, as if it were thus—by thus imaginatively going through the baptism of fire—that he seems to have kept his soul clean and pure.

As he hovered, during this illness, over the borderland be-

tween the consciousness of life and the unconsciousness of death, there was a moment of confusion. But it vanished and 'consciousness was reborn to a new and white dawn'. 'After death has consumed all that is dirty and petty and sordid, let light irradiate life and all its paths... Death has left a background of void' and against this background the poet would paint new pictures of life... Death's dues must be rendered, and they are the whole past, all its sufferings and failures. After clearing off death's obligations the poet will be free and burdenless like the sky in autumn. This 'easy return to what is easy' is real liberation. He begs the world to turn to him once more so that his last days may be full, very full, before death returns and robs him finally of all he possesses. He has covered many battlefields in life's chariot; let it now carry him forward to new fields of conquest in the new life that will be his after his conquest of death.

But the poet's vision and imagination have other directions too. Death has washed away all the hues in which he had adorned himself in the past: what is left is the naked mind and soul. Black and formless void engulfing all earth's form and variety, body reduced to a shadowy point and dissolving into unending darkness—that was how he felt when life and death were in dispute. This is death indeed, in all its gloom and horror; but behind it there is ineffable light, whose own shadow hides it from view. Long has the poet aspired to have a vision of this light and this glory that shines beyond the extreme edge of creation, beyond the realm of darkness. After he has had this vision his life has been fulfilled indeed. The poet's soul is piercing through deeper and deeper layers of realisation until it reaches an ultimate point where dwells the infinite light the *Upanishads* speak of. He wants to go away from this world where there is so much chatter, so much idle and loud talks and whispers of affairs mundane. The dawn of a new life beckons to the poet, its fingers touch his brow. And thus the poet comes nearer and nearer to the fount of everlasting life and light till at last his soul begins to sing the song of deliverance.

While his soul is thus lost in a more and more consuming trance, the storm and stress that are raging on the surface of life send deep reverberations to the poet's soul, and the silence of contemplation is broken by a mighty indignation, a full-

throated denunciation of the evils heaped upon the world. Oppression, brutality, unspeakable cruelty stalk in the world like invincible monsters, and the poet's soul is stung to fiery indignation at this shame, this resurgence of barbarism. Eventually this intolerable fury of anguish bursts into passionate and fierce poetry. The last two poems in *Prāntik* were composed on the same day, and here they are in brief and feeble summary rendering: 'My soul came to the verge of a volcano's infernal crater the day it was released from the caves of forgetfulness. The crater was boiling with smoke and fire; the smoke hissed and burst with man's indignity and exploitation. All the air was blackened, all the world shook, as the foul vapour overspread the atmosphere. And then I saw the imbecile madness of this age, and the unspeakable contortions with which it was making itself hideous before it committed suicide.' The poet appeals to the judge who holds his court in eternity: 'Give me strength and make my voice reverberate with the roll of the thunder that it may echo and re-echo even when this shameful age has been buried beneath the ashes of its own pyre.' In the next poem, a very short one, there breathes a fierce but pure fire of anger against all desecration of humanity: 'Vipers are breathing poison everywhere, and it will be a vain mockery now to utter the charming message of peace.' So, before the poet departs, he sends out a call to all those 'who are girding up their loins to fight the monster'.

The realisation of a tranquility that nothing can shake, on the one side, the equally deep disturbance caused by contemporary events, on the other—this oscillation persists down to the last day. That serene, contemplative harmony, the assured aspiration for eternal life and light that gives such a quite glow to the last days is, time and again, shattered by the convulsive, harrowing reactions caused by the iron and brutal system that tightens its grasp upon the world more and more strongly as the poet's life draws to an end. Suffering, pain, shams break into and shatter the soul's deeper longings, again and again, and are transmuted into music. Every volume after *Prāntik* has this disturbed harmony.



If in poetry Tagore was plumbing the depths and the vast expanse of life through various moods of minds and modes of soul, dwelling sometimes on seemingly trivial things, at other times on the human situation at home and in the world outside, and still at other times on the unfathomable mysteries of life and death, always in an attitude of serious search, if he was doing all this in poetry, in the plays that he wrote and staged during this phase he was out to reveal, however, an altogether different aspect of the same life process in an attitude of easy and joyous acceptance of the rhythm and harmony, the cadence and music of the eternal laws of life. Here also he made experiments in new forms of expression in music, dance and drama, in finding new meanings in old themes and in reaching out to higher altitudes of charm and beauty, but the creative spirit here is unburdened of any conscious striving after them.

*Natir Pujā* (The Worship of the Dancing Girl, 1926) was written early in 1926, followed by *Sāpnochān* (Release from Curse, 1931), *Chandālikā* (The Untouchable Girl, 1933), *Nrityanāṭya Chitrāṅgadā* (Dance-Drama Chitrangada, 1936), and *Parīśodh* (Retribution, renamed *Syāmā*, 1936). *Natir Pūjā*, *Chandālikā* and *Parīśodh* or *Syāmā* are based on Buddhist themes, while the other two derive their thematic inspiration from our epic-Puranic legends. But whatever their themes, except *Natir Pūjā*, the three others seem to belong, formally and spiritually, to one group. These plays were staged again and again in Santiniketan, in Calcutta and elsewhere, and are still very popular as the best and purest examples of operatic plays as conceived and concretised by Tagore.

*Natir Pūjā*, based on an old Buddhist legend which Tagore had used before for one of his narrative poems, is a simple play of action written in prose but punctuated with music and dance, and arranged in four acts. The story relates to the time of the Buddha and his royal friend Bimbisāra who in a spirit of Buddhist renunciation has abdicated and retired in favour of his cruel and faithless son Ajātaśatru. The play is set in the night of *Vaiśākhī Pūrṇimā*, the birth-day of the Buddha, when the low-class dancing girl, Śrīmātī, a most sincere and humble votary of the Buddha and his faith, is chosen, because of her merit, by the

Order of the venerable *theras* for the privilege of worshipping at the *chaitya*-shrine. This makes Ratnāvalī, the princess, incensed with jealousy, since she thinks the privilege should have been hers. She, therefore, prevails upon king Ajātaśatru to issue a royal order to the effect that Śrīmātī, instead of offering worship, should only dance before the altar, which Śrīmātī in her humility accepts. At the appointed time she appears fully dressed as a dancer, and as she dances on in a spirit of complete devotion and surrender, she slowly works herself up to a high pitch of religious ecstasy and throws one by one her elaborate ornaments and bright and jewelled drapery before the altar as her offering, until all that she has on is the meagre ochre robe of a Buddhist nun. Finally, as she kneels down and bows before the altar reciting the verses of the three refuges,<sup>1</sup> her head is chopped off by royal order, and the curtain comes down on a passionate scene of religious martyrdom.

Dramatically, *Natir Pūjā* is a most effective play, one of the finest Tagore ever wrote. There is firm dramatic cohesion and movement in the action from beginning to end, and the characters are placed in a pattern of opposition and interaction which is as impressive as it is exciting. And equally impressive is the poet's evocation of the ancient atmosphere, to which the story belongs; this combination of spiritual depth and sense of reality is indeed rare. The inner life of the play belongs to a timeless region of spiritual realisation, and yet how brilliantly the poet creates the material environment in which this realisation is unfolded. Historical data have become not only alive, they have been subtilised and made to correspond to some of the deepest intuitions of the spirit; the external conflict of situation and motive is made to reflect certain elemental and immortal struggles of the human soul. The grand figure of Queen Lokeśvarī torn by an immeasurably deep spiritual conflict, a conflict which sweeps on to a noble conclusion and resolution in the last act, is indeed like a tower around which all the lesser figures are grouped: on the one side, Śrīmātī with her white purity, her serene self-confidence, surrounded by Mālātī and the nun Utpalaparnā; and on the other, the cruel and vain princes

<sup>1</sup> 'I take refuge unto the Buddha, I take refuge unto the Dhamma, I take refuge unto the Sangha' (*Buddham Saranam gacchāmi; Dhammam Saranam gacchāmi; Saṅgham Saranam gacchāmi.*)

Ratnāvalī with her bodyguards. Behind the scenes are king Ajātaśatru and Devadatta with his disciples. They too are torn by conflict. Ajātaśatru and Devadatta are alike false and perfidious, but the king cannot reconcile his perfidy with his conscience while Devadatta is single-minded in evil. The king's divided soul and Devadatta's single-mindedness in evil cast a powerful light on the dramatic conflict, even though both of them work behind the scenes. Śrīmātī is the most lovable figure of the drama, but all the glory and greatness undoubtedly belong to Queen Lokeshvarī. The technical excellence of the play is equally remarkable. Not a single male character ever appears on the stage, yet we never notice that the shadows of Ajātaśatru, Bimbisāra and Devadatta are so continuously cast on the course of the action.

The entire action is concentrated upon a single day which being very early, with the nun Upālī begging alms at the palace gate when the dawn of a new life for Śrīmātī begins; it ends as the shadows of evening descend upon the murdered and prostrate body of Śrīmātī. A whole history, a history of intense turmoil and opposition and significant decisions, is condensed in the events of a single day, in a few scenes and situations.

*Sāpmochan*, a short and fugitive play in music and dance, uses the well-known theme of the celestial dancer Ūrvaśī's misadventurous encounter at the court of Indra, the Lord of the *devas*, of the curse that followed and her release from that curse.

*Nṛīyanāṭya Chitrāṅgadā* is but a version in music and dance of the poet's exquisite verse-drama *Chitrāṅgadā*, composed in his early youth.

In *Chandālikā*, however, the poet uses a well-known Buddhist legend—in which the Buddha saved, from the evil and lusty attention of a *Chandāla* girl, one of his male devotee Bhikshu. Ānanda, by his spiritual power—to illustrate how an untouchable *Chandāla* girl was transformed by the love and humanity extended to her by the Buddhist Bhikshu. The curse of untouchability that disfigures Hindu society is in this play a deep human concern with the poet, and he utilised the theme for creating a situation of intense psychological and spiritual conflict and eventual transformation of the personality of a lowly girl despised and humiliated by the society. The play is a short one with only two characters appearing on the stage, but between the two



there is a whole world on the move, a world of lust and love, of kindness and humanity, of black magic and spiritual illumination caught in the web of an intense human situation.

In *Parīśodh* (or *Śyāmā* as it was called later) *Śyāmā*, the heroine, is a lovely courtesan who falls in love with *Vajrasena*, a handsome foreigner, who is wrongfully implicated in a theft case and is condemned to death. *Śyāmā*, in her infatuation for *Vajrasena*, persuades one of her many lovers to take upon himself the charge of theft and sacrifice his life. *Vajrasena*, grateful for what *Śyāmā* has done for him, falls in love with her, but soon discovers the utterly inhuman way by which she saved his life. He feels disgusted and humiliated and goes away leaving lust-blind *Śyāmā* to her fate. Both *Chandālikā* and *Śyāmā* have a moral: love when blinded by lust offends humanity, but when informed by the consciousness of moral and spiritual values, illumines human personality.

But it is not any didactic truth or any spiritual idea that makes these two plays significant works of art. Their merit lies in the psychological drama involved in the situations, the great spiritual intensity as revealed in the characters, and in the rarefied atmosphere of dance and music through which the action moves forward to its climax.

Indeed in all these plays music and tone, dance and colour far transcend the spoken word. 'If there is no music', says the poet referring to the dance-drama *Chitrāṅgadā*, 'then the words and rhythm are crippled. You cannot recite the words; they will then seem to be as ridiculous as winged creature meant for flight, trying to hobble on the ground and toppling over at every step.' This is equally, if not more, true of the dances. In fact, in almost all the seasonal plays as well as in the plays under review, dance is one the most significant modes of the poet's self-expression. To begin with, Tagore attempted to communicate the idea of a play by means of song and dance; we see this in *Śārādotsav* and *Phālgunī*. *Sesh-varshaṇ* and *Vasanta*, at a later stage, continue the technique of *Śārādotsav*, but in these plays songs are given much more importance than dialogue, and the idea is made dependent for its expression more on music than on dialogue. The process continues till at last, in *Sundar* and *Nabīn*, dialogue is discarded altogether. In *Nabīn* there are some prose recitals but they are there just to bridge the

songs. There are dances also in these plays but they exist there only as accompaniment, music being the main prop. In the last phase, however, the idea is interpreted less by music and more by dance which becomes the chief vehicle of expression. *Śāpnochān*, *Nrītyanāṭya Chitrāṅgadā* and *Śyāmā* belong to this last phase. It was as if ideas, feelings and emotions, the subtlest and the purest, could be made visible through the medium of dancing. *Nrītyanāṭya Chitrāṅgadā* is an eloquent illustration of this. So is partly *Nafīr Pūjā* in which all the complex of conflicts, of fine emotions and of pure feelings, which make the play so great, finds a visual representation in the dance of Śrīmatī which is indeed a vital part of the drama's structure.

A word must be added to refer to the dance-forms Tagore adopted from tradition and the transformations he effected to suit his own requirements. To begin with, his repertory was very modest as his early dance-forms in the seasonal plays, in *Varshāmaṅgal* (1921) for instance, would show. A few simple forms of our rural *Bāul* and tribal-rural dancers, and a few nondescript movements not derived from any particular tradition but designed to express the mood and rhythm of the song were supposed to be enough. But somewhat later he came into the knowledge of *Manipuri* and *Sinhalese* (Kandyan) dance-forms. In the former he found an inexhaustible source to draw upon for visual concretisation of the *līlā* mood in slow, fluid and rounded movements which he found most suitable for girls. The latter, that is, the Kandyan forms, characterised by angular movements, were vigorous and of a quicker tempo; these he drew upon for composing his dance for men. But so far, that is, roughly during the twenties of this century, which was the period of his early experiments in dance-compositions, whichever traditional form or forms he drew upon, he was using them in an isolated, fragmentary and self-sufficient manner as it were, his main aim being, as in his approach to music, to bend the steps and movements to the needs of the mood and rhythm of the song. The idea of integrating the diverse parts of a particular dance into a whole and autonomous rhythm to express an idea or concretise a conception had not yet taken hold of him. Later, however, he was introduced to the classical richness of the *Kathākali* dance-form which had nothing in common with the traditional north Indian and *Manipuri* dance-forms. In its

original home, Kerala, *Kathākali* was, as it is even now, fettered by a rigid convention of laws and regulations which were a little too much to appeal to the free and flexible mind and sensibilities of Tagore; they did not also fit into the purpose he had in view, since it was an immediate human response and not virtuosity or esoterism that he was looking for. But in *Kathākali* he saw the possibility of projecting, through its diversity of quick gestures and vigorous movements, the whole idea, the whole conception and theme of a given play with all its modulations of mood and feeling. Tagore, therefore, attempted to free *Kathākali* from its construction, and make it a free and flexible vehicle of original ideas and conceptions. The dance compositions of all the plays from *Sāpmochan* to *Syāmā* are thus based on *Kathākali* and to an extent on *Manipuri*, the latter for girls alone. As in music so in dance, Tagore's attempt was directed towards freeing the tradition from its ritualistic rigidity and making it more fluid, flexible and human.

## 4

In an earlier chapter I said that in Tagore's career as a composer of music, the last twenty years of his life—from 1921, when he started composing his long series of songs on the seasons, to a few weeks before his death—was the richest and most creative and significant period, both in quantity and quality. Indeed this was the period when Tagore built up the edifice that has now come to be known as *Rabindra Saṅgīt* or the Tagore School of Indian music, a new genre in our *artha-saṅgīt*. This was the period that witnessed the perfect integration of his subtle and sensitive poetic bent of mind with the equally subtle and sensitive moods and melodies of our classical tradition—that perfect blending of one melody with another based on the similarity of mood and tonal value and thus creating the entirely unorthodox series of what is generally called *miśra* or mixed melodies. This was also the period when Tagore effected a perfect integration of music and dance, one interpreting and contributing to the other and thus expanding the horizons of both. From *gītināṭya* or musical drama to *nritya-nāṭya* or dance-drama stretches the story of a creative experi-



ment that has opened up new possibilities for exploitation in both our *artha-saṅgīt* and dance compositions.

Except for about half a dozen compositions in 1925 based on north Indian and a few in 1931 on south Indian, that is, Karnataka classical tradition, there is hardly any during this period that owes its inspiration and form to borrowing from any other source but his own. During this phase, too, his songs come to have a wide thematic range (religion, life of the senses, mind and spirit, love, nature, patriotism, etc.), and it runs through the whole gamut of human feelings and emotions, yearnings and aspirations. Indeed, there is hardly any mood or feeling, even in its subtlest shades and nuances, for which Tagore has not a song. Their refined, subtle and sensitive evocations reach very far beyond words and their meaning, and countless are the almost elusive images they rear up. Leaves, twigs and flowers, the sky, the air and the atmosphere, human life and its unfathomable mysteries, all receive new connotation in the words and melodies of these songs; unknown and unrecognised objects and phenomena of life and nature are made known by new names and forms and given new images in our consciousness. At times the compositions of this phase (1921-41), by their subtle evocation, seem to over-step the borders of human sensibilities and fill the realm of consciousness with the magical elusiveness of a chant.

Thematic variety and poetic quality apart, what makes the compositions of this period so unique is the rich repertory of *miśra* or mixed, rightly speaking 'new', melodies that he brought into being. A sensitive and knowledgeable commentator and connoisseur of Indian music<sup>1</sup> is emphatically of opinion that these melodies are 'new', 'not only new, but in their newness they obeyed exactly the same principles of reaction which the great musicians had adopted and the public accepted ... Tagore's compositions of this stage repeat the course of development of Indian classical music.' Yet they are solidly based on this tradition, that is, on the melody forms of our courtly classical music and on its time and season theory. Besides the tunes and melodies of our folk and tribal music, to which I shall refer in a while, the melodies on which Tagore took his stand are all those that had been more or less well known in our musical culture.

<sup>1</sup> Mukherjee, Dhurjati Prasad, *Tagore: a Study*, Padma, Bombay.

As for its time and season theory it is enough to point out that Tagore's morning songs are almost all invariably based on *Bhairavī*, while his evening ones on *Puravī*, *Bhīmpalavī* and *Bihāg*; similarly *Mallār* and *Megh* are reserved for the rains, and *Vasanta* for spring. But Tagore felt that in the execution of the very intricate but precise melody forms of the classical tradition, the original emotional theme of mood and emotion tended to get submerged or dissipated in bewildering improvisations, adornments and embellishments; virtuosity, knowledge of craft and experience of technique could go no farther indeed. He, therefore, set himself to effect as much economy as he could by simplifying, if not altogether discarding the improvisations, the embellishments, and the highly technical intricacies so as to be able to concentrate on the main theme of the melody and thereby exploiting it to the full to heighten the intensity of the mood or emotion. An analysis of the process involved shows clearly that he had a complete mastery over the details of Indian classical melodies, and his skill and competence for simplification of intricate details and heightening the emotional impact of the theme were always adequate for the purpose of producing the effect he had in view.

The same authority on Indian music, to whom I referred above, recognises about forty new melodies that Tagore brought into being during this period, and points out that they can be grouped under a few main *rāgas*, such as *Mallār*, *Bhairavī*, *Mūltānī*, *Kalyāṇ*, *Kedārā*, *Vasanta*, *Bihāg*, *Todī* and *Megha*, of which the first three were his favourites. Within each group there is a variety of blendings of various other melodies. The principle of blending is based on (a) the intimacy of emotion and feeling; passing quietly and unobtrusively from one emotion and feeling to another more or less similar, and (b) on the similarity of arrangement of notes in the two melodies that are sought to be blended. In this work he followed on the whole the general principles of blending and integration in the evolution of any art form, principles that are usually followed by all great composers. But what is more important is the fact that Tagore seems to have been the first person to find out the laws that governed the evolution of Indian classical music, inasmuch as he brought together the melodies that were similar in time-scale, in affinity or closeness of emotion and feeling and in close-

ness of notes. In the process he had, however, to innovate new *tālas* and *chhandas*, to which I referred in a previous chapter.

But Tagore's greatest contribution to Indian music was the creative use he made, from 1921 onwards, of the tunes and melodies of our common village folk—the wandering minstrel, the boatman singing his way downstream, the beggar and the mendicant at the house door, the man at the plough, the Santal boy herding his cows, the simple devout mystic and the village men singing in groups. He made their tunes and melodies an integral part of our classical, but courtly, heritage by grafting them on the latter or inseminating the latter with the fertile seeds of the moods, themes and melodies of the former, that is, of our unsophisticated rural folk. Their meek acceptance of life, their deeper yearnings and aspirations, their mystic faith and devotion, their sense of wonder and their helplessness at the hands of fate, all seem to have been transubstantiated by nature through the centuries in a countless number of tunes and melodies simple in form, direct and immediate in their appeal. Tagore's responses to these tunes and melodies were too deep and intimate, because of the very demands of his personality that ever was in search of expansion in depth and magnitude. It was therefore only natural for him to try to integrate them into the form and spirit of our cultured and sophisticated tradition of music, and make our music a truly homogenous and national cultural expression. Such blending and cross-breeding may not have been always successful, but the general process and the products that Tagore has left behind him have undoubtedly extended the possibilities of further growth of Indian music and opened up new avenues of experience. Tagore's subtle insight into the collective consciousness of our common folk, as revealed in their songs and music, coupled with his knowledge of the intricacies of melody and rhythm of our classical but courtly music, has given a new depth and dimension to Indian musical tradition.

The simplicity, the directness and the immediacy of appeal of Tagore's musical compositions have induced many to make light of their creative significance. We must not forget, however, that all essential values of human life are simple, direct and immediate in their appeal, nor should one forget that the qualities or values, just referred to, of the compositions of Tagore were evolved through a long process of training in more than one



tradition of music and experiments with their forms and techniques. Simplicity was the product of a long, arduous and complex process, directness that of a skilful and consummate execution of an idea that was intellectually conceived, and the immediacy of appeal that of a deep insight into human mind, senses and sensibilities acquired through years of experience of human affairs.

## 5

During this phase of his life Tagore wrote and published as many as five novels: *Yogāyog* (Strange Coincidences, 1929) originally conceived in 1926, from which year it was serially published in a Bengali monthly as a trilogy under the title, *Tin Purush* (The Three Generations), intended to tell the story of three generations of men and women of a family of landed aristocracy; *Śeṣher Kavita* (The Last Poem, 1929), a love story written throughout in a poetic vein but in scintillating prose; *Dui Bon* (The Two Sisters, 1933), a short novel of psychological interest; *Mālañcha* (The Bower, 1934), a still shorter novel, also of psychological interest but more dramatic in character and treatment; and *Chār Adhyāy* (The Four Chapters, 1934), his last work in this genre, a short but powerful work based on the conflict between love and political ideals.

The central theme in all these novels is love, and the characters in these are moulded by their attitudes, responses and reactions to love, which in their turn create new situations in which the characters find themselves. All the characters are thus immersed in themselves, without any consciousness of the larger world in which they live. Their social context serves only as an inevitable background, not as an integral part. No deeper issues of life are involved except the assertion of one's individual personality through love or because of its absence.

In its original conception, that is, in the conception of *Tin Purush*, *Yogāyog* contained the seeds of a novel of epic dimension, but when the plan was whittled down and the epic pattern abandoned, the slow epic movement was retained, although the design no longer had the epic range and extent. The canvas was cut off without any regard to whether the reduction would

suit the theme and the characters or not. As a result, the characters in *Yogāyog* appear to be truncated and stultified, and the story reaches a dead-end before the organic evolution of the theme and characters is complete. The story ends abruptly with the end of the first generation only when not one of the basic issues, with which the novel started, seems to have reached a solution. The circle is flattened out instead of being perfectly rounded, and everything fritters away in a weak and vague ending. The construction of the story, too, is somewhat patchy and the different parts are sometimes a trifle unco-ordinated.

As it is, *Yogāyog* is the story of a gentle and lovely young lady, Kumudini, daughter of a cultured and self-conscious aristocratic family that has inherited the high and refined values but not the material wealth of the disintegrating landed aristocracy of the nineteenth century Bengal. The heroine of the story is married to a crude and coarse, but newly rich, industrialist, Madhusūdan, a real go-getter, a man of flesh and blood used to the assertion of his will and authority, and that with success. A conflict of values and patterns of behaviour inevitably ensues; but Kumudini, nurtured in the best of Hindu tradition and culture, tries to see in her husband the deity of her life, and, despite her inner distaste and occasional feelings of repulsion, yields to the amorous embraces and physical demands of Madhusūdan. But, eventually, she can do so no longer; each time she submits herself to her husband she feels humiliated, her self feels trampled upon by an insensitive animal. The inevitable result is a deep inner revolt which makes her leave her husband's house. But, in the meantime, she has carried Madhusūdan's seed in her womb.

The main interest in the story lies in the tender unfolding of the deep psychological conflict in Kumudini, and in the very skilful and penetrating analysis of the slow and gradual transformation of Madhusūdan's feelings and attitudes towards his wife. In the beginning he is at times coarse and violent, at other times exultant, but, then, because of Kumudini's passive submission and perfect poise, he also sometimes feels for her a great affection and tenderness, and sometimes he feels guilty, and occasionally he is struck dumb with fear and admiration. He cannot understand her, and the more he wants to love and possess her in his own way, the more she eludes his grasp, until,

finally, he loses all his confidence in himself and behaves like a fumbling fool. This fascinating unfoldment of Kumudini and the incisive analysis of the psychology of Madhusūdan are both developed in slow stages of conflict, through situation after situation. Both the characters are drawn clearly and convincingly. The less important characters have also their respective roles to play and they do so effectively, the clearest of them being Śyāmā, the maid-servant.

But the most fascinating character in the novel is Kumudini. Tenderly the author draws the delicate but clear lines of her body and paint the pure colours of her soul in soft and subdued tones. Pure and fragrant like the jasmine, tall and graceful like the stalk of the *rajanī-gandhā* (a white tubular flower with a long stalk), Bengali literature has not known a maiden purer, lovelier and more delicate. Yet her creator has made her suffer silently throughout without the slightest touch of pity or remorse, such is her creator's artistry.

*Yogāyog* has a slow tempo. It is written in brief sentences which are at the same time bright with epigrams; the style shines and flashes like clear sunlight. There is a dry and piercing intellectual clarity, a deep wisdom and a detachment in the dialogues and narrative of the story. There is poetry in it too. From the standpoint of style this novel is not an unworthy successor of *Chaturāṅga* (A Set of Four, 1916).

Written almost simultaneously with *Yogāyog*, *Śeṣher Karitā* is altogether different, different in setting, in theme, in style, in language and in treatment. The social context is a small, intellectual and literary group of ultra-modern metropolitan Bengali society, extremely self-conscious. To this small and exclusive group belongs Amit Ray, an Oxford-educated young man, who delights in being consciously original in everything; he expresses himself against current views and opinions; he revels in deliberate phrase-making, speaks in epigrams and witty frivolities. In one of his flirtations he is involved, with a young ultra-modern fashionable Bengali girl, Ketakī Mitra, nicknamed Kitty. Then he meets Lāvanya, a product of modern education, a person of cultured tastes and feelings, of sharp intelligence and refined sensibilities. He falls in love with her; a slow metamorphosis takes place in him and the inner man awakes and comes out of its cloak. But he finds it extremely difficult to



adjust his newly found self with his other sophist and smart and intellectual self, and makes a half way compromise of being romantic and at times by being sentimentally poetic, even in a very childish manner, towards his love. Lāvanya, transformed in the meantime by Amit's love, yet highly sensible and sensitive that she is in love, sees that the person Amit is really in love with is not the real she but a romantic image of hers built by Amit's purely subjective wishfulness. She feels hurt to the core since she likes Amit and has even a great fondness for him. But, nevertheless, she feels that if the situation is allowed to continue it is bound to end in tragedy. She, therefore, releases Amit from their mutual pledge of marriage and goes out of his life, taking her farewell in a poem that is remarkable for the depth and sincerity of her feelings for her lover. In the meantime, Ketakī, once disregarded by Amit, is transformed, because of unrequited love, into a new being, and makes her appearance after long years. Amit goes back to her and says: 'So long my wings were outspread and the whole sky was my home. Today, with folded wings, in an attenuated home, I rest, but the sky remains my other home', followed by a metaphorical annotation, 'I love Ketakī, too, but she is like the water in a pail, for daily use and waste and replenishment. My love for Lāvanya is like a pond. I cannot fetch it home, but it is there for my soul to swim in it.' A very weak explanation, uttered somewhat unconvincingly! Lāvanya, however, goes back to Sobhanlāl, a shy young man treated by her rather indifferently in youth but who never lays aside her memory and love. And Lāvanya reflects: 'The stalk might have grown into a tree, but I kept it unwatered. If I had not scorned him, I might have possessed all his love. But seven years ago I was too proud, too arrogant in my knowledge and intellect. What charm made the despised young man's love so strong that it survived such defeat and sorrow? Its own nobility.' With a full heart, she returns to the life of the man who has waited for her all these years and worshipped and adored her image.

The plot seems to be rather a tangled one, which is partly due to the extremely difficult self-conflict and the problem of the adjustment through which every character has to pass. Partly, again, it is deliberate and springs from the artistic design to make the inner clash of personalities more palpable by giving

it an external expression, as it were, in the very structure of the plot. The novel's pivot is the Amit-Lāvanya relation, its complex and delicate reverberations spreading unendingly. Behind but not overshadowed by them are Ketakī and Sobhanlāl. An invisible and unbreakable tie, which Amit struggles his best not to acknowledge, binds him and Ketakī, and a similar, forgotten bond, long laid aside by one of them but never sundered, exists between Lāvanya and Sobhanlāl. They are all drawn flawlessly; the lines are bold and clear and of unsurpassed grace. How they live and grow before our eyes, even Sobhanlāl whom one sees but seldom! As for Amit and Lāvanya, one may argue, there is enough scope to draw and paint them full length in all their hues and tones, but for Sobhanlāl there is only one short episode in which with precise economy of words the author gives him an outline and contour that are enough to reveal a shy and sensitive soul. This is equally true of Ketakī, who appears but twice in the story, and of Yogamāyā, a minor but a clear and transparent character. The main interest of the story lies in the skilful unfoldment of the psychological transformations that take place in Amit and Lāvanya and bring about new situations which have a cumulative effect on their personality. It is of absorbing interest to see how their changing emotions slowly step into and admonish their cherished ideas and ways of life. The emotional disposition of love, for which Tagore seems to have an unerring instinct, finds consummate expression in this novel.

Someone has said that Tagore was not a 'professional' in novel-making, which indeed he was in the making of poems, songs, musical compositions, short stories and plays. I believe it is a correct observation, and, except in *Gorā*, he never seems to have achieved that coherence of construction, solidity of structure and roundness and intensity of characters that make a novel great. The bodies of his novels are rather thin, the endings rather weak and unconvincing, and there are loose-ends in their construction. And *Śeṣher Kavītā* is no exception.

Yet the book is a fine piece of art. Tagore wrote few things as beautiful as this. There is wonderful height of poetic imagination; the epigrams shine with a keener edge than ever before; the short sentences, bright and crisp, take one's breath away by their speed, and they hardly allow the reader sufficient

pause to explore their meaning. The style of dialogue and narration has a lightness which is almost acriform, and yet a steel like strength goes with it, an erect and distinguished manner. There is also great intellectual power, wisdom, and passion and beauty in the short, swift, moving sentences. The book is a great love poem written in prose. There are no exciting events or situations, no striking drama; it is a sedate love affair in an affluent leisurely community cultivating its refined poses and tastes. Yet the action and language have such tempo that they sweep one off one's feet; the characters of the story seem to be on the wing. The surging passion and poetry of Amit's and Lāvanya's love seem to be transmitted to the language and situations of the story itself. And what scintillating wit in the dialogue, what playful mockery of all shams and shibboleths, what rich exuberance of youth, what beauty and delicacy of feeling, what probing into the depths of love! *Śeṣher Kavita* is indeed a rich book, a testament of love and beauty.

One word for the female characters of Tagore's novels written so far. First, they come off much better, much more clearly and colourfully than his male characters, for their creator's sympathies are, frankly and unequivocally, with the former. He shares their love and passion, sorrows and sufferings, their ideas and ideals. Secondly, and this is more important, the love and passion of his heroines, on whom he bestows all his artistry to bring them up, never reach their full circle; he makes his heroines sacrifice themselves of their own accord, and thus release their heroes in the higher interests of the male. And, thirdly, all his heroines are made of the same stuff; they are all highly intelligent, they have all cultured tastes, refined sensibilities and fine and delicate feelings; they are responsible, clean and pure in heart and mind, and are graceful in form. And, therefore, they shine much better than their male counterparts.

About six years later, Tagore wrote two short novels, one close upon another, *Dui Bon* and *Mālañcha*, both based on the same theme: the eternal triangle of love which, in two different given situations, he tries to understand intellectually and in a somewhat abstract manner. In *Dui Bon* a middle-aged man, Śaśānka, married ten years to a motherly wife, Śarmilā, who jealously and somewhat possessively nurses and nourishes him up



to a successful business man, conscious of his manhood, for the first time, suddenly finds himself helpless when his wife becomes invalid. As it often happens in our families, Ūrmilā, her younger sister, just blossoming into womanhood and feeling the first urges of love and passion, comes to look after her invalid sister and run her house. Then the inevitable happens. Dissatisfied at being mothered for long, discontented with his failure to assert his manliness, Śasānka now turns to Ūrmilā, who is a woman of altogether different type; she loves assertive, even aggressive, men who refuse to be nursed or spoon-fed. She, therefore, quickly responds to Śasānka's approaches and each naturally finds fulfilment in the other. They gravitate to each other. Śasānka inevitably attempts to rectify what he thinks to have been the mistake of his marriage, which, of course, upsets the social relationship. But then the suffering Śarmilā offers herself for the supreme sacrifice, and asks Śasānka to marry Ūrmilā: 'She is my sister and she will give you all that I could never give you.' But by now Ūrmilā sees her mistake and departs from the scene. The tragedy is somehow averted no doubt, but this comes about through episodes and scenes that increasingly slide into absurdity. A human situation analysed and laid bare with masterly skill and sharp insight into the psychology of the characters that are clearly drawn, a personal and social problem none too rare, degenerate into a weak and unconvincing story.

Śarmilā is the most impressive figure in the novel, though she is not very convincing at the end. But, inspite of this aberration, she is the only figure who shines in clear brightness, the only one for whom the author has any sympathy. Śasānka is spineless, totally contemptible, and that is how the author too regards him. Sometimes he ridicules him even. But whether it is Śasānka or Ūrmilā, the portraiture of their respective personalities is clear and vivid and is perfectly convincing.

In *Dui Bon* tragedy was averted, but *Mālañcha* is a dark tragedy, nightmarish in the squalid horror, its sheer and unredeemed pettiness, and the ending is a trifle melodramatic. One feels that Tagore's plan did not materialise fully in *Dui Bon*; so he proceeded to write a new version of the eternal triangle, in order to explore the spiritual and psychological problem that arise when a married and middle-aged man falls in love with another younger woman. The result is a tragedy of un-

surpassed horror, pain and sordidness. Perhaps *Mālañcha* should have been written as a drama. The complete detachment and impersonality, the absence of all personal comment, the preponderance of dialogue, the quick tempo of events, such qualities as characterise this short novel, go better with the drama form.

After ten years of happy married life Nirajā gives birth to a child that dies soon after; she loses her health and strength and becomes a chronic invalid. Saralā, a distant cousin of her husband, Āditya, and his friend from childhood, comes to attend on her and to look after the garden which she and her husband had reared up with their own hands. Āditya and Saralā are thrown together a great deal and their old friendship deepens and takes on a new meaning. Nirajā does not see or hear anything but she has terrible and obscure intuitions as she lies in her bed. Her body and mind wither, all the grace and sweetness of her nature evaporate. She tries to resist herself, but fails. Her springs of generosity dry up; she becomes harsh, cruel and is shrivelled up. Eventually she suspects Saralā, feels intolerably jealous and does not conceal it from either Saralā or Āditya who, knowing that their affair is no longer a secret, throws away the screen of secrecy, and begins to treat the helpless invalid wife with a cruelty sordidly brutal and heartless. The drama then moves inevitably towards the end. Nirajā lies on the verge of death; she knows it and shrinks with terror from the thought. 'Shall I be completely destroyed? Will nothing be left of me', she asks her husband in dreadful despair. 'Won't a trace of me remain? Not a trace?' And the husband's cold reply is, 'If it is possible to live now, it is quite possible that we shall go on living even afterwards.' Nothing could surpass the harsh, dry cruelty of Āditya's words, their lethal indifference. Even after this, Nirajā makes a desperate attempt to be generous, to give away all freely before she dies. But she cannot. 'No, no, I can't give, I won't give.' She gets hold of Saralā's hand and screams shrilly, 'Get out, you witch, I won't let you stay.' Yellow and thin, she suddenly stands erect on the bed and shrieks out in a weird voice, 'Be off, at once, or I will kill you, I will make your blood dry up.' Then she collapses in a heap on the floor.

What a ghastly, horrible end of a woman who is innocent throughout! But why is she unmasked in this sordid, brutal

way, where was the need for it? There seems to be an exaggerated violence in all this which makes one feel that Tagore, in drawing this scene, was going against his own nature. He starts with determination to expose the whole sordid filth of the Āditya-Saralā relation, and nothing, it appears, must be allowed to mitigate its horror and squalor. In *Dui Bon* the author's sympathy for Sarmilā is clear and unmistakable; but for Nirajā in *Mālāñcha* he seems to have none; she attracts no love, no admiration, even no sympathy.

In language and style, *Dui Bon* and *Mālāñcha* continue the tenor of *Śesher Kavītā*. There is the same wizardry, the same epigrammatic brilliance, the same polish, the same brevity and sparkle. Irony, dry humour, intellectual penetration and deep wisdom, these are present in as full a measure as in *Śesher Kavītā*, although admittedly there are occasional signs that the old spontaneity is drying out and is being replaced by mannerisms. Life in *Dui Bon* and *Mālāñcha* is harder, and somewhat sordid; passion has a ferocious and destructive quality which is far removed from the charming and lovely poetry of *Śesher Kavītā*, and in both cases the drama is enacted in the presence of death itself. I, therefore, wonder at times if the courtly language and brilliant style with all their clever graces of expression that suit *Śesher Kavītā* and *Chār Adhyāy*, the next novel, are quite appropriate for these two novels.

The revolutionary terrorist movement of the first two decades of this century provides the setting of *Chār Adhyāy*, as in *Ghare-Baire*. In this novel too Tagore attempts to show how the claims of revolution more often than not stultify and distort individual personality and suffocate individual needs and emotions. A grim shadow of terroristic activity looms behind the situations in the story and the characters seem to emerge out of this shadow.

Atin joins this conspiracy and chooses to play with fire not so much because he is impatient of political serfdom as because of his love for Elā, one of the fiercest players in the drama. She takes him in hand and struggles to forge a hero out of him. Under her probation Atin's eyes open to the full and real meaning of the step he has taken. As he comes to know his comrades better and sees them in action, he realises that, although there is in them much of dignity and nobility, much of discipline and sacrifice, there is also in them much of falsehood and hypo-



crisy, mistrust and vileness, and even selfish betrayal. He feels he has made a mistake and that the terrorist creed can never be his; with him it is all a terrible, a catastrophic defeat of the soul, a defeat which is sterile; it degenerates in worse corruption. But Atin is no weakling, he is not seeking to run away from danger, for, even when Elā, who has also been considerably transformed in the meantime, asks him to give up, he refuses to do so because he feels he must now share the fate of his comrades, whatever the consequences. His heroism and fearlessness pass the fiery test; but an intense personal realisation convinces him more than ever that he has made the wrong choice. In Elā's case, however, it is not a personal realisation that makes her agree with Atin and take her place by his side, but it is Atin's love that teaches her the truth. Sharing all his agony in her soul, she struggles to go back and find a different path; she cries to Atin: 'Go back. You have pulled down the house in which I lived all these years. I am now lost and clinging to the boat's broken rafters. Go back and take me with you.' When Atin says, 'It is too late,' she retorts, 'Take me with you wherever you go.' For Elā it is a realisation of love, not of truth and self as in the case of Atin.

It is clear that the core of the novel is not terrorist conspiracy but Atin-Elā relations, the story of their love and its consequence. Their conversations, their discovery of one another, their responses and reactions to the last tragic catastrophe which they have to face, it is these laid out in beautiful poetic form that leave the deepest impression. Of the very few references to physical aspects of love in the total corpus of the poet's work, here is one, and he gives us one of the most impressive accounts of love's primitive irresistible, barbarous urge.

The author's knowledge of and attitude towards the revolutionary terrorist movement, as revealed in the novel, is frankly romantic, and the characters are all touched and tinged by this romance, Elā and Atin not excluded. But the most romantic one is Indranāth, the impersonal superman who happens to be the leader of the group. But the minor characters, Akhil and Kānāi, are much more real in comparison. The charm of the novel is that of poetry, intoxicatingly warm, throbbing and passionate. It is this property of poetry that seems to melt and fuse elements of the real world into a glowing splendid mass, in which

familiar things lose their usual features and become like shapes we never saw. Yet in construction the book resembles the drama; the four chapters are like four acts. If one leaves out the descriptions, what remains is dialogue charged with drama, clash of characters on the mental plane, characters lithe and tense with an inner conflict. There are many touches of melodrama too: the sound of the whistle in the unreal teashop, the electric torch, the sudden appearance of a taxi under the vast dark, overspreading banyan tree, the hint of chloroform at the end of the last chapter, the whistle again. One wonders if all this is not stale melodrama.

The last three novels of Tagore are short in size and in scope. They have a thin content. *Chār Adhyāy* alone shows some depth, since here is an attempt to get to the bottom of certain issues and problems. But all alike are somewhat isolated from the many-sided content and richness of life. There is constructional weakness too which is perhaps sought to be made up somewhat by a subtlety of analysis and exploration. There is also an aridity, a dessication of feelings and sensibilities, but side by side and perhaps as compensation one gets a new kind of brilliance, a new, indirect, epigrammatic poetry of feeling and expression. One wonders, however, if it is not a poor substitute for the larger sympathy and sensibility of his earlier novels.

Yet in these years and the few years that follow, Tagore's poetry is alive as ever, fresh as ever, and strides from height to new height as never before. Waves of new light from all corners of the sky dash against the aging poet's soul which is reborn exultantly with a fearless and mighty courage. Layer after layer of experience, the depths of life and death and of the human spirit struggling with them, lie revealed. Broken and feeble in body but with a giant's strength in spirit, the poet conquers new horizons and writes poetry and music of a kind he never did before. And the indomitable, turbulent strength boils over into prose essays whose snappy, tough language creates a new model and tradition of Bengali prose. Why are the novels of the period so poor, so sterile, and, to use a word one never associate with Tagore, so wobbling? Is it because he was aging and could not freely move about amongst his people and maintain lively and creative contact with them, or is it because he had become too great and too much surrounded by or associated with men

and women of one type, class or sort, and was not easily approachable by all and sundry, or is it because his range of experience of many-sided common life as lived from day to day had necessarily narrowed down?

## 6.

In 1930, in the course of his long European tour, he was in the land of the Germans, a people for whom he had a high regard and admiration. While in Germany he was taken, among other places, to Oberammergau, the well-known centre of Christian Passion plays. He saw these plays and felt so deeply moved and impressed that a few days later, when he was still in Germany and the inspiration fresh and vivid, the well-nigh seventy-year-old poet sat through a whole night to write a long poem, *The Child*, the only one that he ever wrote directly in English. Later, it was translated into Bengali as *Śitūrṭha* by the poet himself, and included in *Śeṣ Saptak*. Here is a Biblical theme, the nativity and birth of Christ, transformed and transmuted by Indian myths, symbols and imagination into a moving universal drama of the ever-renewing life of man symbolised by the new-born. The mystery of birth and death and life's eternal march through the rise and fall of civilisations, through glorious light and fearful darkness, is concretised here in stately images, meaningful symbols and dignified diction; scene after scene roll on in mighty waves as it were, and in the Bengali version, at the final crests of the waves there is that life-generating refrain, 'Victory to life, victory to the newly born', the echo of which seems to reverberate through eternity and the universe.

Soon after the poet found himself in the Soviet land where a new chapter of human civilisation was opening up and was meeting new challenges on its way. He had heard and read much about the contradictions in Soviet professions and performances. He had an instinctive distaste for the violence resorted to by the Bolshevik regime and also for the ruthlessness of the Soviet party machine. By tradition, upbringing, and personal discipline and inclinations he could not have anything in common with the communist ideology of Marx and Engels



that took its stand on atheistic materialism on the one hand and economic monism on the other, nor could he have any faith in or regard for any ideology, the achievement of which depended on accentuation of hatred and conflict between one class of man and another, and on adoption of inhuman means, if necessary, for reaching good and humane ends. His whole life had been a testimony indeed against the philosophical basis of what is called Marxism or Communism.

Yet, when he went to Russia where large scale experiments in a new civilisation were taking place, and saw things for himself, he came to describe his visit as a 'pilgrimage'. Tagore, who had gone round the world several times and had seen and known men and things at all the big and important centres of human civilisation, knew the import of what he was saying. It was a 'pilgrimage' indeed. There is no reason to think that he was taken in by the rich welcome and sincere hospitality that the Soviet Government extended to him, since he was all the time deeply conscious of the serious contradictions that lay between the violent and aggressive means and methods adopted on the one hand and the human and humane social ends achieved on the other, and freely gave expression to his misgivings. When Tagore went to Russia, the Soviet scene, as it lay open before him, could not but have an overwhelming impact on his sensitive mind, which was acutely conscious of the condition of his own people which was politically enslaved and economically bankrupt, which was blinded by religious totems and taboos, by prides and prejudices and superstitious practices, which was constricted by a social organisation that divided itself into countless hierarchial compartments of classes and castes, the upper one feeding on the lower and trying to crush the latter, and all without education and without any sense of human dignity—and all this after more than one hundred and fifty years of British political and economic administration! How he reacted is vividly clear in the letters; I would quote two extracts only to underline the attitude of his mind.

...to day at the very threshold of the rich invincible Western civilisation Russia has raised the seat of power for the dispossessed, completely ignoring the angry scowl of the West. Who will go and see this, if I do not? If their aim is to overthrow the power of the powerful and the wealth of the wealthy, why should I fear, why

should I be angry? How much is our power, how much our wealth? We belong to the band of the hungry and helpless of the world.<sup>1</sup> [p. 14]

I am now in Russia; had I not come, my life's pilgrimage would have remained incomplete. Before it is time to assess good and evil in their activities here, the first thing that occurs to me is: what incredible courage! What is called traditional clings to man in a thousand different ways . . . They have torn it up by its roots here: there is no fear, no hesitation in their minds. The seat of the ancient has been swept away to make room for the new. [p. 10]

Apart from the opinions expressed with which one may or may not agree, the more remarkable thing is the robust attitude of mind, the courageous faith in new experiments in human civilisation for the freedom and well-being of humanity that find eloquent expression in these letters. The poet was seventy, but he was young in spirit, vigorous in thought and ready to welcome any revolution anywhere in the world that would bring men nearer to his cherished heaven of freedom. Had he lived in an earlier age and visited France in the days of the French Revolution, he would have perhaps responded and reacted in the same manner. But in the context of the contemporary situation in India, the Russian scene seems to have been invested with an added significance, and inspired in him an immediate response that was hearty and hopeful.

But the Russian pilgrimage seems to have done something more; it seems to have somewhat affected his personality by giving a new slant, a new dimension to his vision and imagination, to his way of thinking and to his sense of reality. His basic attitudes and approaches to life and death, to time and space, to man and his material, moral and spiritual values, to nature and God, for instance, were all too deep-rooted, too tested by time and personal experience, to be affected by any thing in any appreciable manner. But onwards from now, as he slowly approaches the end of his life, he becomes more and more conscious of the realities of common life. The stark and stern facts of human existence in the context of our social situation, shorn of all subjective visions and interpretations, stare him in the face, and he has a new vision of them. He feels within himself that

<sup>1</sup> *Letters from Russia*, Visva-Bharati, 1960. Translated from the original Bengali by Sasadhar Sinha.

he has now a better understanding of the human situation in his own country and in the world. This new vision, feeling and understanding give added strength to his long cherished ideas and convictions. The youthful vigour, the bold courage, the clear vision of objective reality and the sharp and angry but dignified reactions to the humiliation of man and his world that one finds in many a poem from *Parīśesh* to *Prāntik* are the direct product of this new vision and understanding.

The poet is also made increasingly conscious of an aspect of his personal life which he considers to be a failing and feels sorry for it. He has seen many lands and many people, he has probed into many a mystery of life, has explored life's many dark corners and revealed many secrets, and he has all along sung the glories of life, its joys and happiness and bliss, its pangs and sorrows and sufferings. But even so he has not seen and experienced all that life has to offer, there were still many things in his life that were incomplete, isolated, scattered and neglected since he did not see them in their true perspective. He was not also privileged to see and experience life in the dark dungeons of torture, life torn and twisted by men and fate, life in struggle and torment; he has only heard the sound of the footsteps, the drums of the marchers of freedom, subdued and muffled by distance. He has not seen and experienced the whole of life in all its bare realities; he has not been able to sing of the man that tears away life from the clutches of death.

But now he does; now he sees and experiences life in its totality. He may not have any more time to gather it up all in the palm of his hands, but the fact that he becomes conscious at seventy of what he has not yet been able to do, is evidence of a new flowering of life, of another mature youth, and of a stronger vision, imagination and thought. The poems, songs, dramas and paintings of the period from about 1930 to about 1937 that I have reviewed in this chapter are the flowers and fruits of a second but maturer youth characterised by a heightened social consciousness and a keener awareness of social realities. These will stay with him till the end of his life. Indeed, the last ten years of his life which may be taken to constitute the last phase of his career as a poet, artist and thinker, purport to reval the greatest re-creation he had ever made of himself and the most significant consummation he had ever achieved.



At seventy he opened a new chapter, new but not divorced from the earlier ones, rather connected organically with them. The last ten years were a grand and beautiful finale, and all his previous life had led up to it.

With *Gorā* (1910), *Gītāñjali* (1910), *Gītimālya* (1914) and *Gītālī* (1914), Tagore came to rank as one of our great national poets and took his place alongside Vālmikī and Kālidāsa. With *Balākā* (1916) he was indeed on the road that led him to greatness voicing the heightened consciousness of humanity. But during the last ten years of his life, from 1930-31 onwards till his death, he touches the highest peak of greatness, and takes his seat by the side of Shakespeare and Goethe on the one hand and of the seers of the *Upanishads* on the other, voicing and stirring the conscience of humanity.

## 10. The Sunset Glow

1937-41

ON SEPTEMBER 10, 1937, Rabindranath suddenly fell seriously ill of a virulent infection, later diagnosed as erysipelas. For forty-eight hours he was in a coma, and for four days he fought with death. 'On the morning of the fifth day when he had recovered his consciousness and was propped up on pillows in his bed', writes his biographer, 'almost the first thing he did was to ask for colours and brush and, noticing a rectangular piece of plywood in the room, painted on it a landscape of a dark forest with streaks of faint yellow light struggling to find their way through its thickness, a beautiful painting and obviously symbolic. He also described the experience of a suspended consciousness and its recovery in a poem written almost immediately after the recovery ...

This body of mine—  
the carrier of the burden of a past—  
seemed to me like an exhausted cloud  
slipping off from the listless arm  
of the morning,  
I felt freed from its clasp  
in the heart of an incorporeal light  
at the farthest shore  
of evanescent things.<sup>1</sup>

This poem, with others that he wrote during the period, came to be included in the small volume of poems entitled *Prāntik*, which I have reviewed in the last chapter.

The poet was now past seventy-six. The burden of age was now upon him, which bent his tall frame and made him somewhat weak, physically. His movements from now on were restricted, confined mostly to his abode at Santiniketan or to his Jorasanko house in Calcutta or to the health resorts in the

<sup>1</sup> Kripalani, Krishna, *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography*, Oxford, pp. 383-84.

Himalayas. For the next three years and nine months that he was destined to live he painted as long as he could and whenever he felt like it; he wrote at least three short stories and two dance-dramas; composed songs and music; and supervised production of his plays by the *āśrama* boys and girls. Many of these creative activities we have already discussed in the previous chapter. However, what he mostly wrote till virtually the end of his life was poetry; these poems were later incorporated and published in at least ten volumes. In these last years, he also wrote essays and addresses on the contemporary human situation in India and the world, on art, on language and literature, on education and science; then he continued to write innumerable letters in which he expressed his views on a variety of subjects: travels, literature, art, contemporary events, men and things, speculative thoughts, flitting visions, ideas and imaginations. He also gave us a short but exquisite autobiography of his boyhood days, vivid in word pictures and nostalgically sweet. The essays on Bengali language (*Bāṅlābhāṣā Parichay*, Introduction to the Bengali Language, 1937) and education (*Āśramar Rup O Vikās*, The Character and Evolution of the Santiniketan Āśrama, 1941) show his perennial interest in these subjects. These were presumably written for the immediate purpose of serving the needs of his *āśrama* boys and girls as also of the Bengali boys and girls at school in general. The essays on art and literature reiterate, in the context of the challenge of the times, his well-known stand on these subjects and were written to underline the basic principles of literature as he understood them. The letters, as usual, reveal his varied interests, his introspective and speculative mind, his deep wisdom and his brilliant sense of wit and humour, all of which he retained up to his last days.

But the most significant works of these last few years are his paintings, poems, and essays and addresses on the contemporary human situation. It is in the poems especially that we shall see the deep luminosity of a consciousness reflecting the multi-coloured glow of a glorious sunset. Here we shall see the colours of nostalgia woven into the textures of memory, sometimes joyous and fragrant, sometimes sadly sweet owing to the regretful consciousness of experiences missed, owing to angry and painful protestations against injustice and inhumanity of men against men, owing to the shadow of physical suffering and death, owing



to the infinite love he bore for the world of men and nature, owing to his deep concern for the common man, the lowliest and the lost, owing to his pangs and anguish of the impending separation from all that he had loved so intensely and passionately. All these are there; but, whatever the experience at a given moment, it is gone through in a spirit of detachment, of hope and faith held aloof though they are bold and strong as ever, and in a spirit of peace and understanding not with the powers that be, but with the Ultimate.

But before I pass on to a consideration of the poems, essays and addresses I would like, for a while, to go back to 1928 (since when Tagore had taken to drawing and painting), and bring the story of this aspect of his life and activities up to date. Indeed, since then, drawing and painting became one of his strongest passions, and they absorbed much of his energy, vision and imagination—a passion which retained its freshness and vitality almost to the end of his life. He has left behind about two thousand and five hundred paintings and drawings, all done during the last thirteen years of his life (1928-41), and that too in the short intervals snatched from his intensive literary activities of this period that produced more than fifty volumes of poems, short stories, novels, dramas, essays and letters. On top of this, he also found time and energy to undertake public activities. His physical and creative power, even when he was past sixty-five, was amazing.

Though somewhat uncommon, history has, nevertheless, quite a few significant examples of poets and men of letters who have released their creative urges with as much zest and integrity in line and colour as in words and sounds. Tagore is one of them—perhaps the latest and the most well known. But a muse has to be wooed with patience and constancy, and every art has its own discipline which one has to go through for a period of probation. The poet-painters I have spoken of were no exceptions, and their success and significance have been up to the measure of their discipline, the integrity of their creative urge, and their vision and imagination. Tagore the painter has provided us with an exception to this fairly general rule.

We have a full record of the poet's own words to testify how he came into the realm of painting and drawing. From his boyhood this art had a fascination for him, and there was a time

when, inspired by his elder brother Jyotirindranath who was a talented artist, he, with a sketch book in hand, attempted to draw. It was more like 'toying with picture-making' as he himself says in *Reminiscences*. To his niece Indira he confessed (1893) that very often he used to 'cast looks of longing, after the fashion of a disappointed lover, towards the muse of Fine Art.' Still later, he extended his enthusiastic support and patronage to his two nephews, Abanindranath and Gaganendranath, and much later to Nandalal in their movement for the revival of the traditional art of the Orient. On many an occasion he watched them draw or paint, but there is hardly any evidence to show that he himself ever wielded a brush.

But we have record of his playing freely with his pen (the earliest one of such plays that I have seen belongs to 1905) in the scratches and erasures strewn over the pages of his manuscripts, and since he has long been a master of rhythm and balance, this play resulted in finding a rhythmic relationship connecting the haphazard, scattered and desultory scratches and corrections into a perfect unity. '... The scattered scratches and corrections in my manuscripts cause me annoyance. They represent regrettable mischance, like a gapingly foolish crowd stuck in a wrong place, undecided as to how or where to move on. But if the spirit of a dance is inspired in the heart of that crowd, the unrelated many would find a perfect unity... I try to make my corrections dance, connect them in a rhythmic relationship and transform accumulation into adornment... This has been my unconscious training in drawing... It interests me deeply to watch how lines find their life and character as their connection with each other develops in varied cadences, and how they begin to speak in gesticulations... And this was my experience with the casualties in my manuscripts, when the vagaries of the ostracised mistakes had their conversion into a rhythmic inter-relationship, giving birth to unique forms and characters. Some assumed the temperate exaggeration of a probable animal that had unaccountably missed its chance of existence, some of a bird that only can soar in our dreams and find its nest in some hospitable lines that we may offer it in our canvas. Some lines showed anger, some placid benevolence, through some lines ran an essential laughter... These lines often expressed passions that were abstract, evolved characters that hung

upon subtle suggestions . . .'

I have allowed myself this rather long series of quotations to show what importance the poet attaches to the line in this 'play' of him, the line that binds every disjointed thing in a rhythmic relationship, the line that forms objects and give them their meaning and expression. The passage also reveals that there is no pre-vision or pre-conception, not even the slightest idea or hint of what the artist is going to show or reveal; he simply chooses one line, presumably for its natural cadence or rhythm and as if automatically guided by some inner law or compulsion, and as he repeats the rhythm of the line it calls forth other lines, singly or in bunches, and they, slowly but inevitably, proceed to bind themselves in a harmonious inter-relationship.

This explains the drawings that grew out automatically, as it were, of the scratches and erasures on the pages of his manuscripts. But then there soon came a time when the artist came out of his manuscript pages and began to draw freely on blank sheets, as freely as he pleased, and to paint in colours, and thus grew to be an artist in his own right. A number of such drawings that are creative exercises in rhythm, cadence and harmony, resulting in clearly recognisable and easily pleasing forms because of their facile and flexible curves and rounded plastic volumes, can be explained by the importance the artist attached to the line and its function in bringing about his cherished feeling for rhythmic unity in a given composition.

But, simultaneously, other forms emerged out of the rhythmic relationship of lines, forms equally recognisable but not altogether depending on the line and its movement, forms that reveal a face or a mask or a group of them, fantastic animals, grotesque and monstrous figures, dark denizens of the deep, fictional architectural fragments, or landscapes—all with solid bodies given by ink in various tones or criss-cross scratches. In most of such examples the unknown and unforeseen appearances have resemblances of a sort, with one or other object created by nature or men, but in no case is such a resemblance the result of a pre-vision or pre-conception.

But a stage was soon reached when rhythmic lines and more or less solid bodies of ink were not considered adequate enough for the purpose he had in view. He therefore started using colour, and colour in all its hues and tones, and these again in



all their varieties and blendings; and when masses in their full play of light and shade and in all their rich and vibrating glow stepped in, the images and appearances I have just referred to, were invested with a mystery and a dynamism that the artist's pen and ink studies could never achieve.

There is enough evidence on record to show that the artist's drawings and paintings were all done in great hurry. He would finish a drawing or painting in a single sitting, and sometimes two or three of them in a day, working on like one possessed, in a frenzied urge for creative expression, grudging the time required to choose the right pen or brush or ink or colour wanted at the moment for his purpose. He used to have a dozen or more of fountain pens on his desk, a few dozens of brushes upside down in more than one vase, and few dozens of bottles of ink and colour in a couple of trays—all within easy reach of his chair. But butts of fountain pens, the nails and tips of his long tapering fingers, all kinds of dyes, pieces of rags and what not also served him equally well. He worked with an intense joy and passion, with a sense of freedom, and in all seriousness, but very fast, as I have indicated, so fast and so impatiently indeed that it seems he did not even take care to test the material he was working on or with, which explains why the fragile paper today is crumbling in many cases and the colours fading.

Yet these drawings and paintings are unique. They are unique because they reveal to us an aspect of Tagore's personality which would have otherwise remained undiscovered and unknown. Here is an altogether new Tagore, one arising out of the depths of the mysterious subconscious and laying himself bare before the visible world—naïve, innocent, uninhibited, earthy, not rooted in tradition; sometimes hideous and even cruel, sometimes grotesque and even sinister, and still at other times mysteriously beautiful or innocently humorous or wonderfully mystical. Before us stretches a world of intense drama into which have gone countless experiences of life, childhood and boyhood memories, knowledge of arts and sciences, many fleeting visions and images, all in terms of fantasies transmuted into realities. Here, in this world, there are moods that are tender this moment and aggressive the next, now humorous and grave, and now forbidding, now nostalgic and now violently passionate, now full of

pity and compassion and now relentlessly cruel.

These drawings and paintings have a very wide range: fruits, flowers, vegetation and landscape that botany and geography know nothing of, birds and beasts with faces and shapes that zoology or prehistoric archaeology has no record of, and human types of which anthropology is ignorant. Yet without being representational, they have a resemblance with objects known to all these sciences. Side by side there are also shapes and forms of objects that are clearly known to the history of science and human civilisation or are recognisable in life and nature. Then, presumably, there are also torn leaves from the book of personal life of the artist. There is, for instance, that mysteriously glowing face of a woman with a veil half drawn over her head and the border of her *sāḍī* lining her oval face set with a pair of wistful eyes looking out, that appears four or five times in his paintings. The artist seems to be trying, again and again, to catch the luminosity, the charm and the magic of this face, presumably because he did not feel satisfied with his previous attempts. We find him indulging in such repeated attempts at expressing a certain idea or theme in his songs, poems and plays as well. Here is evidently a reflection of a deep personal experience which I have just referred to. Then, there are certain drawings and paintings of men and women in his *Sey* (He, 1937) and *Khāpchlāḍā* (The Odds, 1937), whom he may have seen or heard of—men and women of local life and history, myth and legend transformed and transmuted by his imagination and transfixed in his vision. In his childhood he had often been uncannily thrilled by stories of ghosts and evil spirits as of fanciful birds and beasts, by tales, myths and legends, and been fearfully curious of the 'furtive things' that dwelt in the huge earthen pitchers intended for storing water for the family. In his late boyhood and early youth he used to be a voracious reader of prehistoric zoology and anthropology, and thus he had come to the knowledge of prehistoric birds, beasts and men. All these lay submerged and hidden in his subconscious only to come up on the surface of the stream of his consciousness when he was well-nigh seventy and after, and they must have been responsible for many a shape and form in these drawings and paintings.

Historically, these drawings and paintings are altogether un-

connected with the tradition of Indian painting, classical or medieval or contemporary revivalist Bengal School of Abanindranath and Nandalal, or the modernist tendencies of Gaganendranath, or for that matter, with contemporary European tendencies in painting, though he may not have been ignorant of or unresponsive to them. Critics have often characterised his drawings and paintings as having the charm and wonder of children's art, or the nature and character of the modern 'primitives'. Nothing could have been farther from truth. Tagore was much too experienced and sophisticated a personality and much too conversant with the best of the culture of a generation to be a child expressing himself in innocence of anything. Nor was he like the modern artists working out 'primitive' in a conscious and premeditated manner, or like the surrealists consciously creating forms with unconscious symbolism, dream, vision and imaginations. Nor should they be approached as a 'side issue'. No, these paintings and drawings have to be taken seriously, if we want to understand the poet's personality in its totality and acquaint ourselves with a new vision and dimension of the art of painting itself.

Thematically and ideologically these paintings and drawings are far away from the general tenor, spirit and atmosphere of his poetry and music, drama and short stories. In the latter class of creations, his themes and contents and their atmosphere are always in consonance with the flowing tradition of his country and his people; he brought about in them technical innovations and he introduced in them new ideas and situations, which have deepened and expanded the tradition, have imparted a new meaning to it, have moulded and modelled it to respond to the needs of his age and the demands of his personal urges; but he never broke away from it. In his literary creations, he avoided the ugly, the cruel and the grotesque; he kept in them away from tense nerves and flaming passion, whether in love or in anger or in hate. Reference to pure physical love occurs not more than half-a-dozen times in the entire corpus of his works, and there too only very suggestively. The general attitude there is one of high sensitivity, of fine polish and sophistication.

But in his drawings and paintings, all this is different; it is a different world, different in spirit, in outlook, in atmosphere. Countless denizens of the deep with the whole story of their



primordial origins writ large on their bodies, and cruel or hideous faces, aggressive or fantastic forms, appear on hundreds of these drawings and paintings in distinct outline, sharp contour and clear colour; they are all live beings with their undeniable claim to existence. The ugly, cruel, hideous and grotesque experiences of life, as much as the pangs of passion and the agony of love that must have been the artist's lot as of any other's, but which he had disciplined himself against or turned his eyes away from or sublimated to a high level of consciousness, since he believed they were discordant with life's essential harmony, now asserted themselves with redoubled force and clamorously wanted to be given recognition by the artist. He still believed them to be discordant, but he could no longer ignore their reality and deny their recognition. Therefore he had to grapple with himself to be able to bring all these discordant notes of life into the discipline of line, volume, colour, rhythm and harmonious design. These drawings and paintings are not, strictly speaking, finished objects of art of a professional artist; they are rather forms in the process of emergence from the dark depths of consciousness of a person seeking to realise himself in an aspect of life that he had so long discarded or had kept away from. The firm and sure sweep of the lines, the effects of darkness, the deep reds and blues laid layer on layer, the portrait like flowers, the tallness or heavy earthiness of dark human figures ignorant of their destiny, the paleness of feminine faces hiding behind them the unspeakable agony of their lives—all these are not so much reasoned out and concretised with deliberate intent as are brought forth explodingly, spontaneously, automatically, as it were, by an irresistible urge for self-expression pressing outwards from within. Fresh and informal, drawn and painted with evident passion, lively in their simplifications, their distortions and their utter disregard of anatomy or perspective, vivid in rich and glowing colours, unified and integrated in harmonious designs, these drawings and paintings have direct and immediate appeal. The best paintings show a very skilful manipulation of tonal effects, ornamental devices and compositional arrangements, and they appear to have been designed with an eye to such details. Whatever shapes and forms are worked out, they are firm and strong, clear and precise, without the slightest trace of vague limpness or airy uncertainty; all exist,

all are real. In each case the materials he uses and the techniques he employs are quite adequate for his purposes.

Although these drawings and paintings are non-'representational', quite a few of them have, nevertheless, echoes of their mood and feeling in a good number of poems and songs and other writings of the period (1928-41). That in these paintings and drawings the artist was grappling with by far the most dominant aspects of his personality—his overall love for and attachment to the finer and more cultured sentiments, feelings, emotions and patterns of behaviour, his preference for softer and more delicate harmonies of life, for joy and bliss, for balance and proportion,—that he was grappling with these tendencies is evident in such novels of the period as *Dui Bon* (Two Sisters, 1933) and *Mālañcha* (The Bower, 1934), where he creates characters that are cruel and situations that are relentlessly aggressive, yet objectively real and true. In *Sey* and *Khāpchhādā*, for instance, most of the poems were inspired by the drawings and paintings themselves; that they would therefore have reflections of the attitude expressed in the latter is only very natural. But darker shadows of them are cast and deeper echoes of them are heard in the poems in *Prāntik* (The Borderland, 1938) and in a few other poems in his later volumes. These are poems that speak of the troubled history of man, of the blind fury of destruction, of the chaos of moral nihilism, of the giant wheel of pain, of the anguish of existence caught in the primordial network, of the instruments of torture, of gaping bleeding wounds, of the scream of storms, of the hunger and bloated voracity of man, and of the perilously cracking pillars of triumph. Again and again in these poems he speaks of suffering, he speaks of death. Life and love and faith in humanity eventually triumph over them all, without doubt; the poet himself declares the triumph in no uncertain terms; but in the process pain, suffering and death inflicted by all that is cruel, hideous and ugly, all that is aggressive, lusty, and destructive in men and nature shake his nerves and give rise to these paintings and drawings as they give rise to the poems just referred to. In 1937, he was seriously ill, near death's door, and a destructive world was already in the making. Here was a direct and immediate confrontation with suffering and death. Personally I cannot but feel that this confrontation has much to do with these poems on

the one hand and the paintings on the other. The deep blues and reds, the darkness that haunt the paintings, are a direct reflection of this confrontation. These paintings are the records of his struggles with suffering and death before he could set his sail to the 'ocean of peace' which was his final destination.

## 3

For a better and more comprehensive appreciation of the poems of this period, as also of the essays and addresses on the human situation in India and the world, a rapid survey of the world history of this time, viewed in the context of India, and a look at the personal situation of the poet may not be out of place here.

Bengal witnessed the early flowering of the Indian national consciousness, when Tagore's genius had all but reached its highest point. As he was growing old, the world was going through a series of convulsions caused by the scramble for power among some of the more greedy nation-states. During the period, roughly of the second half of Tagore's life, Bengal and, to a lesser extent, the entire sub-continent of India had an eventful and stirring history—a history of change and suffering, of the eruption of new ideas, new dreams and new passions, a history of gradual but, in the end, radical transformation of India's national consciousness. This whole history is reflected in, and interpreted by, Tagore's life and work. Indeed, the history of India of this half century or so is the history of Tagore's mind and spirit. He is not just an individual person, not even only an institution by himself, he is the embodiment of a whole culture, he is a whole tradition by himself, and in him we find the deepest elements and tendencies of the epoch. At the beginning of this period, we had the rural civilisation of Bengal, fed and nourished from time immemorial by the waters of the vast rivers that flow through this land; whereas by the end of this period all this had given place to the self-assertive and haughty world of today. This was an astonishing transition; and in Tagore we find the whole transition typified in its separate elements as well as in its totality. It has rarely happened in history for one single person to represent and symbolise the whole



history and movement of his country for about half century!

In the previous chapter I pointed out that the last ten years of the poet's life, from 1930 onwards, were a grand and beautiful finale, and all his ever-recurring previous seasons of life had led up to it. In order to follow the development of this phase in the poet's life, we must remember the economic and political situation of the time.

In 1930, the poet returned from his latest world tour that included Soviet Russia. The whole world was going through a deep economic crisis which all but shattered India's economic life. In 1931 was published *Rāshiār Chīṭhī* (Letters from Russia). The Second Non-co-operation movement collapsed during the same year, and a brutal and bloody regime of terror followed in its wake. By a series of incredibly drastic ordinances, the government of the time sought to suppress every vestige of personal and civil liberty. But, despite imperialist repression and increasing colonial exploitation, new voices, still faint, could here and there be heard, telling about a new ideal of humanity and civilisation. On the political and economic plane, for instance, Jawaharlal Nehru, in his presidential address at the annual sessions of the Indian National Congress in 1936 and '37, gave clarity and coherence to those scattered voices. Soon, however, all voices were strangled by the imperialist repression. Progressive parties and groups were ruthlessly suppressed, and, meanwhile, thanks to their factional fights and differences, they began to grow weak.

Outside India, Italy invaded and conquered the weak and backward state of Ethiopia; Africa had always fired our poet's imagination, and now he wrote a magnificent poem on that continent, stating how it was being exploited by Western nation in their rapacious greed. Japan launched on her career of aggression on China. Germany initiated the cult of race-hatred and let loose a reign of terror. European politics became a matter of adventurism, open greed and wanton robbery, and force ruled unchecked in the world. All the world over culture and civilisation faced a crisis. Man was everywhere in chains, and the altar of humanity, where the poet had worshipped for so many years, was being razed to the ground. Finally, in 1939, the future of civilisation and humanity was consigned to the whirlpool of murder and destruction on a gigantic scale.

Such was the state of the world, and it left a deep impress upon the poet. The marks on his lacerated soul are reflected all over the creative work of this last phase of his life including his paintings. By various ways he drew the attention of humanity to the basic and essential human values: sometimes he invoked those immortals in history who lived and died for such values; sometimes he emphasised the significance of the common man and the deathless spirit in him; then, sometimes, he gave clear expression to his own deep suffering, or pointedly brought out for us to see clearly the stupidity and callousness, the greed and inhumanity that were inherent in the system that prevailed all around.

The prose essays in *Kālāntar* (A New Age, 1937), the well-known essay, *Sabhyatār Saṅkaṭ* (Crisis in Civilisation, 1941), and his open letter in English to Miss Rathbone, among others, reflect this afflicted world. In the anguish of his soul he analyses, with wisdom and passion, the Indian and world situation, and, in doing so, he shows his deep knowledge of, and insight into, history. Sometimes he feels impatient and angry, but his impatience rings with the deep and sincere note of hope and faith in man, his anger glows with the purity of fire that faith in the renewal of life alone can generate. But, bent with age, burdened with the sorrow and suffering of mankind, he stands up erect and aglow as the conscience of humanity, as the Great Sentinel of all human values, and he pronounces his verdict on an erring world presented on the dock of God's court of justice.

But not in the prose essays alone. In many a poem of this last phase, this state of his mind is reflected with the same clarity of vision and imagination, with the same depth of wisdom, in a much more pointed and concentrated manner.

In other poems he lays bare his personal experiences, realisations and convictions, also his failures and shortcomings, as if to prove the validity of the values he wants to uphold, now more than ever before. In 1931 he crossed his seventieth year, and the whole country celebrated his birthday with regal splendour. Six years later he fell seriously ill; he survived it however after a hard struggle, and recovered some of his old strength. The fight with death began again in 1940. It was a heroic struggle but eventually death proved the more powerful. For ten years he had been listening to the footsteps of death coming nearer

and nearer. He had been aware, too, that human civilisation was tottering on the verge of ruin, a civilisation whose values he had once accepted in the belief that they would lead men to a higher and fuller life. The poet's reactions to these events and situations are scattered in everything that he wrote in the last ten years of his life, but mostly in poetry. Nothing could be more peculiarly individual than these reactions and their expression, yet they reflect, once again, the whole social consciousness of Bengal and of India for one full decade and more.

These reactions are clear, unambiguous. He saw with a poet's all-seeing eye the march of history of three generations, not only in Bengal and India but all the world over. In his last years he saw all that he valued shattered; what had once seemed to be eternally true was now soiled with shame and falsehood. In his own land there was degradation, humiliation, bondage. Yet the poet's soul refused to be paralysed; his faith in man remained as firm and bright as before. Never for a moment did he question his life-long belief that man's ultimate destiny was glorious; never did he become a pessimist or a sceptic. In his last years, detached and serene, full of gratitude for the world's treasures which he had enjoyed so abundantly, he prepared himself to face death. Man's naked soul now stood revealed to his unclouded and perfect vision; his experiences only confirmed his belief in the grand meaning of life, despite failures and frustrations.

Death, then, he knew to be coming, and he consciously prepared himself to face it. But he was not eager to leave this world, to go away from the men and women he had loved so long and so much, among whom he had known deep and beautiful peace. How could he lose faith in man's glory and destiny when it was man who had given him this beauty and this peace? Man, nourished by the earth, struggling hard and bitterly—the man in the field, in the factory, in the street—this common, elemental man, he realised, was deathless, and the ideal which is rooted in this elemental humanity was also equally deathless. This deathless humanity Tagore loved, and had faith in, for to him was revealed the truth that is hidden in every common man. All this is there in the poems that he wrote and the songs that he composed in the last ten years of his life.

It was as a result of this warm and passionate contact with



the common man that the poet came to acquire a new objectivity of outlook. The world and humanity, as felt physical facts or objects, made their first appearance in *Balākā* and *Palātākā*, but, in the years between the composition of these two volumes and his last phase, he wavered between his earlier attitudes on the one hand and his inclination towards concreteness and objectivity on the other. During the last ten years, however, his sense of objectivity deepened and took on more definite outlines. He then took up all kinds of themes and subjects, and found a suitably new form and language of poetry characterised by increasing clarity and concreteness, by directness and precision, by compression and freedom. All this issued from his new acceptance of the world of facts and objects, not so much as facts and objects existing by themselves, but by admitting them into the realm of his personality; in other words, by associating them with his self. It is not realism in the usual sense, which is something unknown to, and unrecognised by, the poet. Indeed, Tagore's objectivity meant that a man's self, that is, his personality could grow only by closely relating itself to the world of facts and objects, which was the world of 'not-self'. The earlier phases in the evolution of his personality relegated this world of facts and objects into the background; now it comes to occupy a large segment of the foreground of his consciousness, of his imagination, of his dreams and visions.

And, thus, the poet came to acquire a new sense of human history, indeed of human destiny, and this sense was no abstraction to him any more, but something of his most intimate being. It is, therefore, certainly no accident that he now turned, again and again, to the common man and his every day concerns, away from the bigger men and events in history. He came to believe in the indomitable youth and vitality of this common man, for he knew that without him there would be no civilisation and no progress. The nearer he came to death the more beautiful he found life to be, the lovelier seemed to him the men and women who lived here; all seemed to be more enchanting than ever before. When, therefore, the poet asks in *Paritosh*: Does God forgive those oppressors who are shutting out His beautiful light, poisoning this beautiful world of His creation?—that anguished question is neither irrelevant nor

abrupt. It is this perspective, this flawless vision of life that makes up the poet's last phase.

It is surely remarkable that at a time, when any lesser man would have grown reactionary or sceptical, Tagore, far from losing the dynamism and alertness of his mind and sensibility, went on to explore, with all the old catholicity, new possibilities of knowledge and experience. Aware of the imminent dissolution of the tradition and culture in which he himself was nurtured, aware also of the whole disaster that such a dissolution meant, he was saved from the cheap cult of cynicism by his newly developed sense of the not-self. This enabled him to see at last the transitoriness of every phase of tradition and culture, to see that the onward march of humanity never comes to an end, to see that death and destruction arrive in obedience to natural laws and man himself invites them so that the old and the obsolete accretions may be swept out and new creations forged in their place. It is a vision of mankind marching on eternally, seeking eternally and realising itself. The conflict of beliefs and ideals, the defeat of inadequate faith, the pang of disillusionment—these are only the forms in which the development through struggle takes place. Death and destruction and all the pain that they bring are only the dying agony of the old, the birthpangs of the new. There is no room for pessimism then, no, not even for cynicism, nothing to cause slackness of faith. Tagore was always a passionate worshipper of life; to the shrine of humanity, he always brought the offering of a free and unclouded intelligence, the offering of a pure passion. Wrong beliefs, wrong attachments—do they not spring from the radical sin of ignorance, from the ignorance of humanity? The poet's effort is, therefore, to explore this humanity, to explore its completeness, even through personal suffering and death. It is this vision of man and his world that inspired the poetry of the last ten years of Tagore.

In the meantime, the intellectual and imaginative climate in Bengal, as also the climate of Bengali poetry, were slowly being transformed. To begin with, there was a pronounced reaction against the idealistic, mystical and romantic approach to life that prevailed generally. This was a reaction that made itself felt in an uncalled for emphasis on life lived purely on the physical plane, produced cynicism and pessimism, and induced

uninformed analysis of the subconscious, and all this in the name of realism and objectivity of outlook. Much of it was imitative and frankly nothing more than attempts to strike an attitude. Since this was no result of individual realisation or social experience, Tagore felt no sympathy for its exponents, though a few of them were good poets and writers.

But waves of contemporary European movements in thought and literature were constantly dashing against the minds of Bengali intellectuals, forcing them into new ways of thinking and doing. Materialist thought, socialist and communist ideologies, social realism in art and literature, scientific humanism, psycho-analytical methods, industrial and mass psychology, Eliotian experiments in verse making, images and symbols of a new civilisation, new techniques of expression, Joycian experiments in coining words and phrases and many other things went into this process of thought and creative expression. For the first time—and this happened in Bengali literature, markedly in Bengali poetry, in the thirties of this century—there was a serious attempt by some of our more serious poets and writers at capturing the echoes of world thought and literary movements in a creative and significant manner. For a conscious and sensitive artist like Tagore, it was impossible to ignore this literary climate, and though much of it went against his grains and therefore he had no use for, he was, nevertheless, somewhat affected by it and for some time made certain daring experiments in versification. The prose-poems in *Punarcha*, *Sash Saptak*, *Patrapuṭ* and *Śyāmali* and some of his still later poetry bear the impress of these experiments. It was also during this time that he read a great deal of Eliot and other contemporary English and west European poets, and translated Eliot's *Journey of the Magi* into Bengali. But more than formally and thematically, that is, in the choice of his subjects and characters, he was affected by the generally realistic and objective tone and temper of the movements referred to above and by the world climate generated by them. A good number of poems of his last ten years clearly reflect this change in him.

But basically Tagore was idealistic and even romantic, to use vague but widely used clichés of art and literature, and he was not ashamed to be described as such. His sense of objectivity and realism, despite the change I have just spoken of, was



altogether different from what we usually understand by such terms; so was different his sense of idealism and romanticism. They were shaped and formed by his experience of creative unity and personality, to which I have referred again and again.

*Prāntik* (The Borderland, 1938), the last volume of poems considered in my last chapter, was followed, a few months later, by *Ākāśpradīp* (The Lamp in the Sky, 1939). As the dedication makes it clear, the poet was not quite sure how this volume would be received. He had doubts if the poems would find any appreciative audience among his contemporaries. His hesitation is understandable. In youth and middle age, he had no need to look beyond himself; his self-contained imagination was enough to secure him a large audience. But times had changed, the climate all around was different. And more: the familiar faces and things, among whom he had passed his earlier days, were no more; they were now like dreams floating high up in the sky. What could he do but light a lamp on a tall bamboo pole and try to capture these dreams by its faint, subdued light? The house was empty; all those who had once lived in it were now only dreams and memories; what was, then, the use of illuminating an empty room! He had better take the lamp outside: so many dreams were hovering in the sky; the light might tempt some of them to descend. So all the poems, which are but so many lamps lighted high up, are memory-laden, 'floating away into the unknown, heavy with the load of dreams like a heavy barge'.

But should he dream dreams? The poet tries to justify himself in the poem 'Timeless'. There are things, he says, which you cannot squeeze into life's routine; they do not belong to time, and where shall they find solace if not in dreams? But the defence is quite unnecessary. The sky is the sky of the poet's memory, and the associates of the past are shining there with a quivering light like distant stars. In life's evening the poet calls them back to his memory and thus gives himself the illusory pleasure of their company. What is there in modern ideas to question the desire for this illusion? Are not these memories rooted in undeniable human nature, and what is the poet's goal but the revelation of human nature in all its promptings and desires?

Indeed, as his life draws to an end, the poet seems to under-rate and ignore at times the world's larger issues in order to dis-

cover in human love, in human joy and sorrow, in human experiences, the last and true heaven of his soul. There is nothing antiquated in all this. On this core, the poet admits, he is 'romantic'. Even when an altogether new life is dictating a new perspective and attitude, he does not forget to remind us in *Navajātak* (The Newly Born, 1940) that he is a 'born romantic' and so wears a 'coloured mantle'. And those who know this should not feel surprised if he lights a lamp in the sky and sees visions and dreams.

The poems in *Ākāśpradīp*, as I said, are reminiscent. The best ones in it recapture and embroider memories of a distant past. The increasing value and beauty that he finds in these memories were clear in *Punaicha*, *Sesh Saptak*, and *Syāmalī*. Still it is in *Ākāśpradīp*, *Señjuli* (The Evening Lamp, 1938) and *Sānāī* (The Flute, 1940) that the real significance of this retrospection shines most clearly, and it was never lost till his penultimate volume, *Janmadine* (On the Birth-day, 1941).

Few among poets have told us with a more engaging naiveté about their past, about their shy and unspoken longings and desires, about their ambitions which were never fulfilled; few have recalled the timid and insignificant memories of the past with such beautiful charm and assurance. Retrospection is natural in old age. As he recalls the vanished days, many feelings and thoughts swell in his mind, and they give a beautiful tinge to trivial facts and events.

The finest poems in *Ākāśpradīp* are about such reminiscences. In poem after poem the poet returns in dream to childhood's lost days and evenings; and the dream is inexpressibly beautiful. Nursery rhymes and fairy tales play a large part; their atmosphere and music return to his aged soul and reawaken in him echoes laid aside during all these years. It is these that inspired such creations as *Khāpchhādā* (The Odds, 1937), *Chhadār Chhabi* (Rhymes Illustrated, 1937), *Sey* (He, 1937), *Galpa Salpa* (Stories and Verses, 1941), and *Chhelebelā* (My Boyhood Days, 1940). But in *Ākāśpradīp*, in *Sānāī* and in *Señjuli* the remembered dreams are integrated with the poet's mature sensibility and have deep roots in adult wisdom and experience. Take, for instance, the poem 'Bride'. Many years ago, when he was a little child, the poet's grandmother repeated to him some nursery rhymes about how the bride was coming

in a sedan chair, decked with gold and emerald. As he heard those rhymes the child felt in him certain half-understood vibrations, and these vibrations lingered on even in his youth, taking on more and more charm and magic. All his life the poet had been looking for that charming bride, travelling in a sedan chair and wearing gold and emerald, but she was nowhere. One day, on a sudden, the mysterious touch of someone's fingers thrilled his body and soul, and, startled, he asked her if she was indeed the fairy bride whom he had been looking for ever since his childhood? Had she then at last come to him from the land of dreams? No, she was only her messenger. The bride had ever been coming and her name was written near the poet's heart in the leaves of the trees and in the stars of the sky. She had got into the sedan chair long, long ago, but she was always losing her way among the lights and shadows of the stars and always wandering among them, wearing emerald and gold. In certain other poems there are charming accounts of adolescent love and the first unfolding of womanhood. Beautifully the poet describes the shyness and strangeness of the first acquaintance gradually ripening into intimate converse, which, then, timidly and unknowingly, buds into love. But even after this, we learn, 'the pain of partial knowledge' remains: 'The beautiful is ever distant.'

Elsewhere there is a graceful picture of how love flowers in the immature soul of a boy. The bitter sweetness of this boyish love has no other purpose but to awaken him to the new passion of love, which will then fulfil itself elsewhere. But its bitter-sweet beauty lives on in memory, and enriches life thereby. In another poem, 'Argument', there is a searching examination of the nature and claims of love. The poet was once in the habit of separating love from physical passion, but now he seems to agree with the modern denial of this separation, and in novels and stories from *Dui Bon* to *Tin Sangi* he suggests certain interesting and profound revisions of his whole attitude to love in its relation to the body and the soul. The same revaluation we find in certain poems in *Akāśpradīp* and *Sānāi*. In 'Argument' he clearly formulates, perhaps for the first time, the identity of love and desire: 'If love is the vessel of nectar then desire is the appetite that makes us long to drink it.'

The central theme of the poems in the poet's next volume,



*Señjuti* (The Evening Lamp, 1938), is life's approaching end. The title is appropriate, for most of the poems have the soft and mellow radiance of an evening lamp. Some of the poems are entirely personal. In the shadowy light of the evening lamp the poet sits waiting for death, and in the half darkness shapes from the past, as well as the approaching shadow of death, haunt him. He says in the dedicating poem that after he returned from death's dark pit, his acquaintance with himself begins anew; for, during the harrowing experience, 'the door opening into the country where there are no forms and shapes', 'the borderland of the country where there are no landmarks', had been revealed to him. Today his veins tingle with the echoes of that far away and blue country: what the echoes mean the poet does not know yet, he will do so later. 'Today is my Birthday' is a fine achievement alike in its form and content. A new birthday has arrived, but in the celebrations the poet is only a transient guest, waiting for death's signal to start on a new journey. The world has little use for him now and, before casting him away altogether, it is depriving him one by one of all his physical senses. But can this neglect really mean that the poet's life is useless now? The poet is of the human race, and to man and his imperishable glory the world will have to pay homage for ever. So he is reassured, strengthened in his love for the world which neglects him today. He has always loved the world and all its sights, and even in the humblest of things he has seen the radiance of immortal beauty. So mysterious was the message that the green grass spoke to his soul: only in death's land will its meaning be revealed. To the last, therefore, he will sing hymns to the earth, leaving behind him the flower that has yet to bloom, the love that has yet to be fulfilled.

There is another poem on his birthday, equally beautiful although written in a lighter key. All his life he has listened to the eternal message of the all-pervading nature; the earth has given him plenteous treasure, and in this poem he expresses his gratitude for it. Still in another the poet sees the endlessly joyful journey of life and the universe, and the joy and emotion touch his own soul too. Today, before his life is over, he will put out the lamp in the corner of his room and fare forth in the company of the sun and the stars. This, then, is the substance of the poems in *Señjuti*: love for this earth, this saturation in

the life of nature and the revelation of his self in it. Over everything float hints and suggestions of infinity, as the poet sails out to chart the unknown seas.

There is a ripe and golden charm in all the poems, all throbbing with unspoken memories. In 'Introduction' we learn that one spring the poet's boat was moored in a harbour and all the men and women wanted to know who he was. He could not tell. Then, another day, he set sail again, singing of youth's sorrows, and the young men and women at once knew him as one of their own, and greeted him. But gradually the river ebbs, the ripples die out, and the boat is driven towards the sea by the ebbing current. From afar, new sailors, new young men and women, ask him who he is as he sails away to the land of the evening star. And the poet tunes the *sītār* and sings: 'I am one of you.' This is his last as well as his first introduction of himself.

*Prahāsini* (The Smiling One, 1939), the poet's next volume of poems, belongs to an altogether different genre. These poems sparkle with fun and mischief; irreverently the poet laughs at persons, institutions, and functions that he finds amusing or strange. All that had been troubling him have vanished, leaving only a trail of good-humored laughter. 'Sparks of fun', so numerous that you cannot count them, fly out in all directions.

Women of the age, with their new-fangled ways, provide one of the targets of this fun. Sometimes the poet laughs at himself, sometimes at the madness and extravagance of modern poetry. But, however whole-hearted the fun, a deeper note is seldom absent; behind the rippling smile there is always an unshed tear. Mostly the keen and subtle irony is only a disguised vehicle for serious criticism and revaluation. There is one poem which is a pointed criticism of modern poetry, of its tasteless coarseness, its love of dirt for dirt's sake. Jaga, the gardner, has woven for the poet a garland of *kunda* flowers; there is a bright moon in the sky, so white and bright that it seems to be touched with the glamour of the *pārījāt* (a white flower of delicate fragrance). But the poet stops short as he weaves these similes, for he remembers that such graces have gone out of fashion in poetry. There must be no such thing as moonlight or sweetsmelling flower in modern poetry, and so the whole sky now becomes a dirty smudge of smoke and dust, and the night is as

black and hideous as the black coolie women just come out from the coal mine with a double days' black. Then, of course, the *kundas* (another very delicate flower) must not smell sweet. For poor Jaga is very fond of tobacco and his fingers always reek with its smell. So the garland also emits a strong smell of home-blended tobacco. Besides, the garland itself is old-fashioned and is not the favourite toilet of the modern poet; he prefers a rope to hang himself with!

This kind of fun he pokes at the modern women too. The modern woman sneers at the way the poet loves; she has no taste for the romantic exaggerations and fancies in which the old-fashioned indulge by force of habit. But what about her? Does not she too waft fancy and exaggeration in her smile, in the rustle and sail of her *sāḍī*, when she comes to meet him in the evening? Can she claim that her smile is made to strict measure like the things of daily life. Has it no extra grace that defies life's economy? And the sky-blue *sāḍī* that she flaunts, the music of its rustle, sent by an infinitely rich musician who lives in the skies, these are exaggerations too. The poet knows, however, that this exaggeration does not belong to the modern girl herself but originates in his own incurably romantic imagination. The ever-new modernness, which has always touched his soul and moved it to sing, is described in 'Anasūyā', for example. The bride who touches the poet's heart and is ever 'modern' has nothing in common with the ladies of the twentieth century, who hold university degrees in economics; she laughs and weeps and makes the poet do so, in the vulgar tongue that belongs to such acts, as she has been doing from the beginning of time. Between this eternal modern and the modern of the twentieth century there is certainly plenty of difference—difference of taste, of speech, of passion, but it is better to make light of the whole thing than to shed tears over this difference!

In the preface to his next volume of poems, *Navajātak*, Tagore says, 'My poetry has changed its season again and again, often without my being aware of it. This change of season naturally brought about a change in my poetic technique and content, again mostly unconsciously. It is the sensitive reader rather than myself who notices the change... Perhaps these [the poems in *Navajātak*] are not spring flowers but the harvest of middle



age, which do not care whether they are pleasant or charming. Rather, they are full of a lifetime's mature experience, and if they were not, the inspiration of adult life would have been in vain.<sup>7</sup>

The new self or season that the poet calls *Navajātak* is rooted in the heightened social consciousness, in an awareness of the dynamic life of the masses of humanity, as we have pointed out already. Yet this is not social realism either as we know it today, and the poet himself never claimed that he was a realist in the ordinary sense. 'I know the world of facts and objects and all its paths and bye-paths, and ever have I fulfilled all its obligations, not by words but by responding to its call, factually and objectively. Wherever there is poverty, wherever there is sickness, . . . I have put off my silk robes and dressed myself in armour . . .' Indeed, the poet's vision of reality is the vision of 'beauty and power going hand in hand'. The powerful and ringing poems in *Navajātak*, in which the poet echoes the shame and indignation of an outraged humanity, are a clear proof of this. He sees and describes the whole unmitigated shame of contemporary culture and civilisation, the whole horror of the dehumanisation of man in the greedy, money-grabbing civilisation of today. There is nothing personal or private in the poet's passion, nothing which could not be answered back with the same intensity by the whole humanity. But where emotion does not have this mass affiliation, where it is intimate, personal and private—and there is such emotion—the poet never hesitates to be romantic. We see this dualism, perhaps a justifiable dualism, in *Navajātak*.

There is a simple, bare, yet graceful reticence in these poems, a reticence which we first notice in *Parīśesh* and which develops into, as it were, the absolute quietude of consummated realisation in the last four volumes of poems. Between *Parīśesh* and *Navajātak* there were moments of the old expansiveness, moments of somewhat uncontrolled exuberance of indignation and language that belonged to bygone days. We notice this plenitude in *Patraput*, for example. But from *Navajātak* on, the reticence becomes more and more crystallised, dense, pregnant; every superfluous image, every superfluous suggestion of the imagination or passion or intellect are kept away, and the resultant poetry is a poetry of sheer meaning and content.

The new perspective and attitude that make the title of the volume so appropriate can first be noticed in the choice of subject-matter. Even technological objects and affairs now engage the poet's imagination: the railway train, the aeroplane, the radio. The images that crowd into the poet's mind are modern too, culled from the most humdrum. In one poem he compares his life to a railway train steaming off at night, full of sleeping passengers. The same metaphor is used to illustrate the conception of individual life flowing to an unknown destination. Elsewhere, the flux of people in the world is compared to the entrance and exit of passengers in a railway station. There are poems on the aeroplane, but the poet does not like this modern invention at all; it appears to him as a monstrous symbol of the arrogance and murderous cruelty of a technological civilisation. He prays for the annihilation of this soiled and brutal age, so that birds may once more sing in the forests of this ravaged and torn world!

The poet is increasingly aware that contemporary civilisation is void and empty at the core, that this civilisation can only exist by shaming and degrading the human spirit. In *Prāntik*, as we saw, there is fierce denunciation of this vileness and shame. Since then his social penetration has gone deeper, and in *Nava-jātak* there is a much clearer perception of this. He now sees that there can be no compromise, that the present civilisation must go through fire and only then will be born 'new life, new light'. Poem after poem repeats the poet's magnificent defiance, his call to humanity to rise and overthrow the monster that is stalking the earth today, his militant faith in the new glory and life that will be born after this nightmare of horror and destruction is over. He is aware of the internal conflict of this civilisation, he is aware that it has divided the world into two camps—that of the hungry and that of the satiated—and that the fight between them is as bloody as it is decisive and uncompromising. He knows that lust for possession alone is the governing principle of the contemporary society, that this civilisation, in spite of its gorgeous facade, is really only a bottomless pit where robbers have gathered, looted and stolen the treasures.

But he did not despair. For the faith in the future is assured and it never falters for a single moment. Mankind must expiate its accumulated sin, and how can one run away from the terror

and agony of this expiation? And after this fiery atonement a new civilisation will be born; every new-born child is a symbol, a promise of that. With this faith there can be no despair; rather there is unquenchable and indomitable vitality even when the battle seems most hopeless. The sense of the changing destiny of men is best revealed in two poems, 'Hindusthān' and 'Rājputānā'. The former is finer as poetry, but the latter shows a richer sense of history. Modern Rajputana, a miserable caricature of its former glory, is only a farce on the stage of today's history, and it would have been more seemly if it had been destroyed by one devastating blow; the shame of its slow decay, stage by stage, is intolerable!

In some poems there is intimate self-exploration, a revelation of some of the most personal feelings and moods of the poet. He is deeply troubled because the mission of his life is not yet fulfilled, and he blames his own shortcomings for this. He knows that his is a 'romantic' nature, basically detached from outside concerns, intrinsically impelled to search for life's meaning in his own soul. 'It cannot come down from its height to the muddy level of the multitude.' But this awareness does not palliate the sense and shame of a partial, unfulfilled achievement. From boyhood right up to old age he has searched and revealed many obscure mysteries, but his pen has been frail and delicate. His music, too, has been frail and delicate, and the harsh, the ugly, the grotesque, which he never sang of, have today massed themselves to shatter its calm harmony. And the poet prays that the soft enchantment of his music may be broken so that it may resound with the roar and tumult of thunder. 'May this virile and stormy music resound in every corner of the sky, may the voice of the god of thunder put the writers of ornate language to shame.'

The rest of the poems in *Navajūtak* is of a different kind, a kind with which we have been familiar in Tagore's earlier work. They are inspired by the vision of a secret land beyond time and human date, by the intuition of advancing death, by the dream of a sightless and formless beauty. These dreams and visions and intuitions have a background of personal life and are soaked with the beloved memories of the past. This gives to these poems an intensity which is not so prominent in the earlier poems.



As poetry *Sânâi* (The Flute, 1940) perhaps comes off better than *Navajātāk*. Its lyricism is superb, and it contains probably the sweetest poems that Tagore wrote in this phase; these are lovely in music, in the grace and charm of emotions. The love which he felt in youth is felt again as memory recreates the past, and those memories of the past which we found so sweet and poignant in *Pūravi* (The Evening Melody, 1925) come back with all their plangent music. That mistress of the past returns a second time to cast her spell over these poems, and it is long since we saw Tagore enchanted and enchanting like this. It is as if life is again tinged with old hues. Again we hear the song of simple love, of simple delights in nature, mixed sometimes with reminiscences and sometimes with an anguished indifference, because his days in the world are nearing their end. Sometimes again life is heroically adored with all its joys and sorrows, victories and defeats. Again and again the restrained notes of *Sânâi* recall the fuller music of *Pūravi*. There are a few stories in verse, and they too have the same soft note. The intimate and passionate experience of death of the *Prāntik* days is now somewhat remote indeed, and the poet feels no interest in probing the mysteries of creation and life, death and destiny. It seems, history, society, his personal significance, all alike have ceased to interest him for the time being. Detached and indifferent to outside events, the poet remembers the past, sings about it in charming and delicate notes, tells beautiful stories about it.

But this detachment does not last. The outside world knocks insistently, and how can the poet remain indifferent to the great war of devastation that has been raging all over the world? The new social vision cannot be long suspended; it breaks across the charming dreams of the past and shatters them. Embattled armies are marching outside with drums and trumpets, and the music of the clarinet is quite drowned by their harsh and jagged noise. True, 'the plains of Bengal are as lovely and sleepy as ever, and when sunset is followed by twilight's shadows, the straw-laden bullock cart trundles across the meadow as somnolently as before. Vanamālī Pandit's son can be seen angling in the pond all day, and flocks of geese suddenly spurt from the dried river bed and fly away to *Kājlā Bīl* (black-water lake) in search of worms. Two friends, one newly married, tell

stories of love as they walk in the fields. But then blares out the radio that Soviet bombers are smashing up Finland, and the silence and peace of the villages are destroyed by the crash of bombs many thousand miles away! And the Tagore who hears this crash and the wail of millions dying in cities and battlefields is a new Tagore, the Tagore of the last phase. The awareness that gives rise to the poem we have quoted from, 'Accident', is a modern awareness, for in the past our dreams and desires were not so cruelly shattered every hour by distant events, as they are today. The real world is too insistent and boisterous today; Soviet pilots bombing the towns and villages of Finland destroy the dreams we dream in a *Chaitra* (the last month of spring) afternoon in a half-asleep village in Bengal.

The poet, however, manages, in most of the poems in *Sānāi*, to shut out the world of facts and objects, and we are grateful that, once again, we have a glimpse of the Tagore we used to know in the old days. There is again the beautiful assurance and peace that are associated with a complete vision. The poet knows that life is full of conflicts and inconsistencies, that its jarring discordant outcry turns again and again our beautiful music into a barbarous howl; that wholeness and integrity are possible only if we ignore near events and keep our vision fixed on eternity. He knows also that the modern age has accepted all this raving discord, has indeed given it a more dominant significance. But what of that? All his life the poet has striven to reach completeness and concord and fulfilment, and this striving is the essential feature of Tagore's mind and art. We see this trend once again in *Sānāi*.

## 5

*Prāntik*, as we have seen, is inspired by a close experience of death, and after this baptism of fire the poet was born to a new life. This new life, which is revealed in poem after poem, carved out for itself new forms and modes through diverse experiences. A settled and assured perspective, the product of integration of the past modes with a consciousness of the new times in all their complexity and significance, gradually emerged. The old poet kept abreast of modern intellectual movements with

unflagging enthusiasm and labour, and at the same time he found leisure to talk and play with imaginary children and tell them beautiful stories.

During this phase the poet had his mind full of little children to whom he told stories. One day, after the story-telling was over, 'I went to the bedroom as was my habit and sat in a chair. There was a damp wind, and Sudhakanta [his companion] came to see if the doors and windows were properly closed. He saw that I was sitting motionless in a chair; he called out. But there was no reply. He touched me and said there was a wet spell of wind and I should go to bed...No reply...Thereafter I remained unconscious for sixty-four hours.' (*Galpa-salpa*)

When consciousness returned after hard struggle he was a new man. As if he was born again, his vision bathed in 'the primal light, beyond space and time.' The poet had only a few months to live after this, months of extreme physical suffering which gradually destroyed his body. But as death's indistinct shadow loomed more and more distinctly, as bodily torment became more and more excruciating, life put on brighter colours than ever, and the poet loved it with a deeper passion. His song of undying life, of man's eternal glory and valiance, became more beautiful. And the four small volumes of poetry he wrote in his last days—days of the most terrible physical agony—surpass all others by their imaginative range and depth, and they have all the world for their subject matter: there is room for every one and everything. The past and the present, the peasant and the factory worker, the clangour of battle and the peace of contemplation, the clamour of humanity and the unearthly silence of the spirit, the old tree towering in the forest and the tiny maize plant, life and death, the intolerable pang of oppression and pain, the day-labourer grinding the wheel, men and women ferrying across the river under the *alvatta* tree, the pitcher of *gur* and the bale of jute, the college girl and the village tramp, the naked Santhal boy and the pariah dog, all these are there in the four small volumes—epics, we may call them. How sweet and joyous living is, what a priceless, immeasurable boon it is to share in the checkless flow of life. In poems of supreme glory, this joy in the living is sublimated into the serene and infinite vision of the *rishis* (seers) of the Upani-



shads, for in gazing at common life the poet ascends to that ineffable exaltation which the *rishis* attained when they had a vision of the ultimate. With never-ending joy and wonder the poet looks at the earth, its houses and its people. And this clear, transparent and immense vision is communicated in a medium which is equally sublime and transparent in its reticent austerity. The world of his poetry in the last four volumes is beyond language and thought, but is, as it were, an extended visual image, beautiful in its stillness.

*Rogasayyāy* (From the Sick-bed) came out towards the end of 1940 and *Ārogya* (Convalescence) two months later, in the beginning of 1941. The two are really parts of the same book and have the same mental substance.

A deep and stately harmony prevails in both, especially in *Rogasayyāy*. Realising death more deeply and intimately than ever before, the poet can now see into the life of things with an assured clarity, a firm faith. A powerful and invincible soul, shining with a white and bright light, imparts all its sinewy strength, all its power of control to these poems which read and sound more like revealed statements uttered in deep and dignified tones. And this majestic distinction is present in *Janmadine* (Birthdays, 1941) and in *Śesh Lekhā* (The Last Writings, 1941), too, there is this stillness of words and passion.

The dreadful illness of 1940 brought him once more into living and burning contact with the 'spaceless, timeless, eternal light' and consumed away whatever dross there was in him. What remained was pure gold. After this 'purgation through physical suffering' he was stronger and fuller than before, more detached, more free from burden and impediment, his vision clearer and more transparent than ever before.

Of this spiritual grandeur one can cite many examples from the poems of the last phase. Although the poet was prepared for death, he was not eager for it. He loved the earth so much with all its beauty! How could he then be eager to depart from it! Besides, life appears to have now taken on a new meaning for him, a meaning he never knew before; so many new paths opened out and invited him. Life, infinite like the ocean, is inexhaustible, so it is impossible ever to have done with it. The poet, therefore, never wanted to die, but again and again he returned to sing about man's infinite and infinitely various life.

This is the theme of his last poems, especially of those he wrote during his long illness in 1940. They radiate a spiritual lustre of rare brilliance, emanating from the power and glory of a magnificent soul.

Such power of soul does not require any extraneous frippery for its expression. The language of these poems is simple, austere, utterly bare. There is no need for any ornament to reveal the truth that a man has attained after the struggle of a lifetime: this truth carves out its own expression. In these poems, therefore, the content is always more important than the form, which is as direct, as forthright, as pellucid, as it can ever be. A soul nourished by its own organic strength and courage, a soul assured and detached from all distractions, endows these poems with its own transparent glory and power. Steeped in his soul force, these poems shine with the light of love and hope and faith. They also have a firmness of texture, a power of discipline and restraint, and a stern and compelling majesty of form. An ascetic severity shapes the language in strict obedience to the content. There is also tremendous concentration; the harmonies and movements are all rigidly controlled.

From the highest peak of wisdom the poet gazes into the meaning of life and death. He is now more than ever before nearer to God, at the same time nearer than ever before to man as well. An undistracted imagination, free as the wind, flits from picture to picture, paints them beautifully, fills them with meaning. When he is lonely, he feels grateful for the care and affection he has received from all. The past returns with its load of beauty and enchantment, and the poet, so nearer death, is yet fascinated by it. Wonderful are the evocations of these poems, wonderful the golden moments that are thus recalled. There is no agitation, no troubling of the soul, but there is peace, the peace that passeth all understanding. And with this sense of peace there is love and humility. The poet cannot forget for a moment how beautiful the world is, how endless its joys.

But these poems do not wholly emanate from such calm and peace. They are also inspired by a new and deep realisation of truth and of the secret essences of life. Creation, the mysterious cycle of birth and death, the destruction of the useless accumulation of the past, the forging of new creation—all these have

their echoes in these poems, sometimes in deep and majestic, at other times in lighter, tones. Physical suffering makes a man weak, saps his faith in life and destiny. His dominating concern with his own body and its sickness makes him oblivious of everything else. But nowhere in Tagore's last poems is there the faintest trace of this natural and universal weakness. In the painful moments of his illness, the poet realises the tremendous power of endurance that dwells in the frail human body. Unmatched is man's self-sacrifice, unmatched his passion for suffering even if it consumes the body: there is no parallel to this 'unquenchable heroism, this unfaltering endurance, this scorn of death, this ceaseless journey onward to triumph'. All have to pass a test of endurance and courage: the wheel on which the world rotates, grinds us all with hideous torture, and how can we hope to run away from it? This unbearable trauma, which however only strengthens the poet's soul, is present in all the poems, forming an integral part of their structure. The poems are about sickness and recovery, and they often talk about pain and suffering; but the poet's personal sufferings are never displayed. In the background of the torment of his own body he realises that all life is but a 'workshop of pain' and yet man's soul always triumphs over it.

A 'track of fire' separates man from his goal; he cannot bypass it, nor does he seek to do so. Undaunted, man pursues his fiery journey and it is this fact which establishes the validity and eternity of his soul. So the whole history of mankind in time and space is a procession of glory. As the artist in life sees this procession unfolding before his eyes, he forgets, in the glory and exaltation of this vision, all the suffering he is going through in his own person. It is man's deathless and triumphant soul that speaks in his voice when, crossing the dark night of suffering at last, he denies this darkness and asserts proudly: 'Conqueror of pain, I stand on the tower of the battered fortress of the body in the morning's calm light.' The way of subduing death is to realise in oneself the eternally onward march of existence, for this existence is beyond birth and death, beyond separation and parting. 'Eternal life streaming in death's eternal current'—that is how he now sees the universe. It is a vast, formless, eternally dynamic process, this roll of life and death in the universe, and he does not know by what name to call it.



Physical suffering is no hurdle in the way of his creative expression. He is only somewhat afraid that his voice is perhaps feebler, his song may not have the sweetness and beauty it had before. The torment of his sick body, in the process of making poetry, is echoed back from the skies. Still he has to write, has to do his best to write well and not falsely or even haphazardly. Man will never forgive his least flaw, just as Indra, the king of the gods, never forgives a single false step in Ūrvaśī's dance in the heavenly court. At the end of the long and scorching day, his muse is fatigued and anxious, worried lest there should be a false step in her dance. But the poet is now indifferent to earthly fame. What does his spirit, about to start on an unending journey, care for renown or obscurity among men? If the future is cruel and it disfigures the noblest achievement, let it begin its depredations any moment it pleases it. Suffering terribly and intensely in his own body the poet has a more intimate vision of the sufferings of the masses of humanity, which, in comparison, makes his own quite insignificant. When he remembers the starving men, women and children, thousands dying for want of pure water or a drop of medicine in their sickness, from exposure to bitter winter cold because they have not a rag to cover the body, his own pain becomes easier to bear, because it seems to be so little. And he acknowledges his responsibility for this widespread woe and suffering.

Terrible failure has accumulated on mankind through the ages; the angel of destruction will arrive one day and sweep away this accretion, for 'this annihilation is decreed by the lord of wholeness'. Then will follow a new and wonderful creation, a creation without flaw. There is thus in him a deep and indomitable faith in the eternal flow of creation, in human love and care, in the truth enshrined in the human heart; faith in the peace and power that dwells in the heart of creation. It is this faith whose splendour cannot be exhausted. He sees life and death united together with a golden thread as between a bride and her husband, and life receiving endless gifts from death.

In one of these poems there is a touching tribute to human affection. When he misses the lady who nurses him, all the world seems to be slipping away from under his feet, and in his terror he raises his two arms to clutch the sky itself. Then, when the nightmare is broken, he sees her at his side, knitting

wool with a bowed head, 'confirming the unbreakable peace of creation'. A poet whose strength and patience remain firm even in the bitterest agony of the body, a poet whose soul, face to face with death, continues the pursuit of life's mysteries, can alone say in love and tenderness: 'This earth is beautiful, its dust is beautiful, and I clasp them in my heart. I sing this great song, because the desire of my life has been fulfilled.' The seers of Upanishads too had sung in the same strain; they too had found that the earth was sweet, the sky was sweet, sweet was the dust of the earth.

Newly recovered, the poet sits by the window, and the wintry air touches his body with its caressing fingers. What beautiful pictures are conjured up from the shadows that the objects outside are casting in the poet's room! How much more beautiful is their reflection in the poet's heart! Memory begins to quiver delicately, to weave lovely pictures of love and happiness and beauty. In the long and quiet hours of convalescence, the poet recalls how man has showered love and affection on him, and gratitude swells in his heart. The wintry air wafts into his mind many poignant memories of the past, events so trivial that he had forgotten them, return as beautiful as dream; the innumerable pictures he had once drawn on his mind's canvas glow again with soft and beautiful tints. Standing on life's shores, the poet feels a quiet joy as memory makes the past alive again, and he paints, in soft and subdued colours, the pictures that memory evokes. How bright, how beautiful are the moments he thus re-lives, how unending their evocation. The pictures are wonderful indeed, wonderful for their purity and beauty and peace. Peace, soft and all-pervading, rules in these poems, and there is never the least hint of any agitation. Man and earth, the redolence of the sky and the earth, the beauty of all colour and shape that exist here, fascinate him. And there is an air of deep and quiet meditation, which circumscribes everything, gives everything the glow of inexhaustible mysteries and suggestions.

And yet the poet sighs that his language has dried up, that he can only cover the pale-blue sky of noon with his silence. Events that he never noticed when they actually happened 'at life's other end', today float back and shine beautifully in his memory: that boat drawn up near the shore of the Ganges in

the quiet hours of midnight; the water shining like silk under the beams of the moon; those motionless forests on both banks quivering with shadows; the sudden glimmer of a lamp through an opening; how the boat darted swiftly away in the current, thrilling the forests on the banks with its motion; and how the night with the queen moon above was lying in deep silence as in the arms of a sweet slumber. Deep gratitude fills the poet's soul as he recalls these wonderful and precious moments, these moments of beauty and mystery with which the poet had filled his heart to the brim so long. This note of gratitude is clear in all the poems. There is no regret, no sorrow. The hoary poet, now past eighty, is serene and lost in contemplation, and it passes one's understanding how out of his soul surges that chastened power, that ethereal beauty.

It is not only the trivial events of his own life that the poet recalls in these moments of enforced idleness. Human history too passes before his eyes in a stately pageant. As men and events thus appear and vanish, the poet has a vision of the real meaning of history. All the triumphant monuments of the Pathans and the Mughals have crumbled to dust, not a trace of them remains. Then came the British commercial travellers; 'on iron tracks, in chariots breathing flame', their armies arrived... and some day they too will vanish utterly. But the men and women whom one cannot count, plodding on at their tasks and filling the centuries with their chatter, remain for ever, for their work remains, and they are really the agents of life and movement in history. Empires decay and are swallowed up by time, but these men and women live ever on, chattering, working, doing all the petty and essential job without which civilisation could not exist a day. It is they who move the wheels of history, it is they who do not suffer the march of humanity to come to a stop.

One notices what a shift there is in the poet's attitude. All the arrogance and boast of power, tyranny's bloodshot eyes, are engulfed in time; but the flowers remain, love and song and light of the sun remain, autumn morning and winter twilight remain. And the poet is never tired of singing of them. But today, this is not what the poet reminds us of: today he says that the ordinary man and woman remain, their work remains, their clamour remains to swell the majestic music of life, while



empires and conquests and monuments become empty fables in children's books. Indeed, in this, the last, phase, contemporary man becomes the hero of his poetry. Man in daily life, without his background of nature, enters his poetry for the first time in *Palātākā*, but there is then no awareness of the contemporary human situation. This awareness begins in *Punaścha*, and we have noticed that, since then, the poet comes down to a more and more intimate level with the masses of humanity. Living human beings elbow and jostle their way into the poet's work from now on: they laugh and cry and sing and complain as they do in actual life. The last poems are indeed a rich procession of contemporary life.

The poems in *Ārogya* are of the same stuff as those in *Rogasanyāyā*. They are not, however, quiet and subdued evocations of the past, like the ones we have so far discussed, but vibrant with mysterious realisations and suggestions that touch life's deepest levels with a deep and passionate spiritual aspiration. In one poem the poet sings a hymn to life in strains that recall the majestic rhythm of the *Vedic* hymns. When the poet puts a mark of dust on his brow, it is God's sign that he wears, for truth embodies itself in joy in the dust of the world. Birds are singing without any cause, in order to sing hymns to the goddess of life. Everything shines with the radiance of man's love and everything is therefore immortal. Even the dust is beautiful and sweet, for the throne of the eternal stands upon it. And the symbol of man's love, man who lives in the earth and rests there after his death, is the mark of dust that the poet wears on his brow. This mark of dust on the forehead is indeed the earth's last and ultimate reward; so full is the poet's heart with passionately joyful gratitude that it remains almost silent and can speak out only in a word or two. To this earth and to this earthy man the poet clings with a passion that is as intense as it is detached. One side of the poet's soul thrills with love and gratitude for man, while the other reposes in deep and calm faith in a great, glorious sun-like being shining with ineffable light. Mysterious realisation centre round the last one.

This double content, gratitude and love for man and earth and an abiding faith in this great and mysterious being that life is, we get in the two volumes that follow. *Janmadine* came out in April, 1941, and *Śeṣa Lekhā* (The Last Writings) a few

weeks after his death. Most of the poems in the first volume were written during January-February, 1941, a few in 1939, and a few others after September, 1940. The last two poems in *Śeṣh Lekhā* he dictated to his attendant when he was too weak to hold the pen. The first one he had a chance to correct, but the last one, dictated three days before his death, remains unrevised.

Standing at the confluence of life and death the poems he wrote he collected under the general title, *Janmadine*. These poems, though they emphasise life, are really full of a stately realisation of death; in each line we hear death's footsteps. The poet, indeed, is waiting for death to appear. The earth, impelled by a mysterious purpose, revolves round the sun, and what is his own life but a part of that mystery? He has lived eighty years and he will have to take his departure in a while and then nothing will be left of him, for he will be where life and death are one. May the distorting, disfiguring touch of death keep away from him at life's last moment, may his life set like the sun, in glory and in humility, the east and the west shining with the same colour and looking at each other. But how can the poet, who has never deceived life and whom life has never deceived, greet death empty-handed without any offering? How can the poet's instrument, once vibrant with all the chords in the earth, remain mute at such a moment? True, he will have to put off those ever new robes and those jewels in which life dressed him once, but it will be a festival, nevertheless: lights will shine, and the poet will preside, wearing a mantle of white. Across the border-land they are blowing conches to welcome him, and the echoes are floating in the air. Let all come and gather in the festival, let all, over-brimming with life and joy, bid the poet farewell.

Far-reaching and penetrating are the mysterious evocations and suggestions in the poems in *Janmadine*. The intuitions are indeed beyond verbal expression, for they seem to touch the ultimate meaning and mystery of life. On one birthday the poet has a vision which stretches far and loses itself in infinite remoteness, where he wanders about by himself, a traveller who does not know his destiny. On another he feels he had never known himself before as he really was, for his real self was hidden behind a curtain, and he was surrounded by ignor-

ance day and night. Sometimes again he feels that his mission was to raise the curtain of mystery on the stage of this world. He sees the eternal roll of creation, the variety and mystery that are extended in life and death, he sees how the useless accretions of the past are destroyed by time which makes room for the new, he sees the eternal glory of the soul which death cannot tarnish. He sees all this and sings of them, sometimes in lighter notes, sometimes in deep majestic chords.

But even in the moments of the deepest absorption, the poet can hear the groans and laments of a world in travail. He sees the hideous and sickly poverty that hides behind the glittering façade of wealth, poverty so horrible that it makes man inhuman. But the day of reckoning is ahead and it will come on in storm and thunder and blow away the whole rotten structure. The bird with only one sound wing will be surely dashed upon the ground and shattered to pieces. Everything old and wrong will be annihilated: and then will emerge a new mankind, a new civilisation. The guns are booming with the thunder of that new age.

The new man shall be non-attached, indifferent to material objects, ever creative. It is the poet's belief that it is these non-attached, disciplined and selfless beings who are the real supermen of the future, who will usher in the new creation. In his last days the poet reposes his faith in them on the one hand and in nature on the other. The superman, whose approach the poet heralds, is not any particular being but an embodiment of human glory itself, circumscribed temporarily in space and time. He remembers Lord Buddha in this connection. The conquerors of death and of the fear of death express this glory and immortality in their soul, and the poet calls upon mankind to do homage to these great beings. He pays them homage again and again in his last days, for they light up life's doubtful path with the radiance of their being; to them he bows his head in reverence before he starts his journey to the land where the being and the non-being have merged into one.

The anguish of unfulfilled life, of which I spoke some time ago, is expressed in a very fine poem in *Janmadine*. It is certainly precious as poetry, but it is also valuable as an indication of a significant mood of the poet. He knows only a fragment of this vast world, and many lands and peoples, many human



achievements, have remained unknown to him. He is the poet of the whole world; his instrument should, therefore, play every note that vibrates in the world. But actually there is much that was never echoed in his music. Although his poetry has covered many aspects of life, it has not touched many in obscure corner. He waits, therefore, to hear the other poets sing, who will complete the incomplete song that he has sung; he wants to hear the poets who share the peasant's life, whose words and practice reflect one another, the poets of the obscure and the speechless, of those whose joys and sorrows alike have no voice, whose heads are bowed down by ignorance and humiliation, who live so near us and yet so far away because we know so little of their soul!

In another beautiful poem he says that, though he has adored the muse of poetry all his life, he now laughs at his achievements. It is now wholly valueless however; the unknown and the ineffable have imparted some significance to them. But all this is really irrelevant today, for the messenger of the unknown has arrived and is waiting to carry him far away in order that he might greet the fathomless ocean. Well-prepared, free from earthly moorings, he hears his soul murmur: 'I am going, going away.'

Most of the poems in *Sesh Lekhā* were composed during the last seven or eight months of his life. A few he wrote down himself, but at least two of them were dictated to his attendants from his sick-bed and later corrected, except the last one.

The poet is now past eighty, waiting for death. He is aware of the fulness that death has brought to life, a full participant in death as in life. In this sense he has been triumphant over death, and in *Sesh Lekhā* the vision of death, complementing and rounding off life, is clear and pronounced. He has known already that poet's soul is greater, more valid than death. To-day, after traversing sorrow's dark night, 'the path of creation entangled with variegated deceptions', after a lifetime of 'worship of sorrow', after having 'seen the true image of his soul drawn in blood', he has obtained in his heart the 'fearless knowledge of the great unknown,' he has known his deepest self, and has thus earned the right to deathless peace. After such knowledge and such realisation there is indeed no more need for ornament, or indeed for the least decorative addition. The

poems are without rhyme, there is not much of imagery and description in them, nor much of musical grace; they consist of only a few clear and bare and straight words, the perfect expression of ultimate realisation. It is difficult to judge such poetry by the well-known aesthetic principles; we can only try and realise, within ourselves, the deep intuition, the conviction of aspirations fulfilled.

Could there have been a fitter expression of the spirit of the poet and of the world, the essence of which is beyond shape and sound and colour, than this sheer bareness of the language. How else could the poet have revealed the last and ultimate truth of humanity and of all life? Never before have we seen such beauty and such simplicity, such bare and naked glory of language, such fulness of knowledge and vision, such renunciation and such joy, such faith and hope and strength. No paraphrase, no translation can give any idea of the real content of these poems. One can only ask in wonder: Can we call these poems in the accepted sense of the term! or are they the voice, the *mantram*, of the inspired seer? And the content shines out so transparently, we cannot analyse it, we can only re-echo it in ourselves.

After having worshipped sorrow for a lifetime, the poet has realized the sacredness of life, the sanctity of life's gifts, of woman's love and of the flowers that blossom; he has realised also that the world is no illusion, no shadow, that death has no power to shatter the vessel of life. Having seen and known this truth the poet can listen to the bird's song with full-hearted gratitude, can yearn for the touch of the loved hand as he waits in the empty sick room. The vanished dreams of the past, the image of the woman whom he loved far off from his own land, come back and set up 'nests of vibration' in his heart; *Śrāvan's* (July-August) rain-washed sky seems beautiful; the friend's hand, as it clasps his, speaks a deep message.

Not long ago we saw the poet despising his achievements. Today he says: 'Dust-covered, my creations will cling to time's feet and vainly hinder his steps, till one day, after a long era of humiliation, they themselves will be one with the dust and there find peace.'

What indifference, what neglect, after all the effort and achievement of a lifetime! The image he has created in the

years and years of labour no longer interests him; dust covers it, there is a meaningless stare in its eye, and one day it becomes dust itself. A strange consummation to look forward to! Yet a natural consummation, a natural indifference, for deep in Tagore's soul there is an ascetic, careless of all things, careless of all passions and attachments, careless even of his own achievements. In the end, therefore, nothing makes him cling to what he himself has begotten. He looks on indifferently as it is scattered in the neglect and dust of the world, and says that this is indeed the best consummation.

And this is our tradition: dust unto dust.

And yet, the world is sweet, its dust is sweet, the men and women made of dust are sweet. If he does not give them his benedictions and receive theirs for himself before he leaves their world, the peace that abides will elude his grasp and the embrace of death will lose its significance.

So, in a poem which takes away our breath by its loveliness, he carries away with himself in his last journey, as his last and most cherished treasure, the memory of the affectionate touch of his friends, the memory of the abounding love and forgiveness he received.



PART THREE



## II. Personal Faith and the Religion of Man

A LITTLE over a decade before his death, in 1930, Tagore delivered, at the invitation of the Hibbert Trust, a series of lectures at Manchester College, Oxford. These lectures, edited and revised by the poet himself, were published a year later in the form of the well-known book called *The Religion of Man*.<sup>1</sup> Gleanings from his thoughts on religion from his earlier writings and lectures were incorporated in this volume. Eighteen years earlier, in 1912, when he was just past fifty, he had written an essay, *Ātmaparichay* (Introducing Myself), in which he sought to explain his personal faith and how his articles of faith and action had evolved. An extended and integrated version of his faith was published, later, under the title *Āmār Dharma* (My Religion). Between 1912 and 1922, he had also published three volumes of essays and addresses in English—*Sādhanā* (1913), *Personality* (1917), and *Creative Unity* (1922)—in which he spelt out his fundamental tenets in respect of art and aesthetics, of life and religion, and in which he called his personal religion 'the religion of a poet'.

A systematic study and analysis of these writings and addresses in their chronological sequence seem to reveal that what was, to begin with, the poet's personal 'credo', his personal experience and feeling and emotion as a poet, evolved slowly into what he came to term 'the religion of a poet', which further evolved, in stages but with the deepening of his personal experience and perceptual thinking, into what he called 'the religion of man'. This process, this evolution appears to have been inevitable. His religion of man reflects the story of an evolutionary process, beginning from what was purely a personal experience as a poet and culminating into what he felt and realised to be the fundamental meaning of the existence of man as man in this world. It is indeed the story of the inner drama

<sup>1</sup> *The Religion of Man*, George Allen and Unwin, London, 1931. Somewhat of a gist of these lectures was repeated in Bengali in a series of lectures delivered at Calcutta University in 1933 and again, in English, in a lecture delivered at Andhra University in 1937.



of Tagore's life, a story of absorbing interest that I have sought to relate, very poorly though, in a number of foregoing chapters.

## 2

Before I try to summarise, mostly in his own inimitable words and phrases, what constituted the poet's religion of man, I must submit, first, that this total conception of the essential humanity in man and all that it connotes (namely, the divinity of man the eternal, the idea of spirituality, and God or the Supreme Person, the *Parama Purusha*) did not grow in him 'through any process of philosophical reasoning'; we must not, therefore, view this religion as a metaphysical concept. On the contrary, 'it followed the current of my temperament from early days until it suddenly flashed into my consciousness with a direct vision'. The first stage of this realisation came through his almost sensuous feeling of intimacy with nature, 'not that nature which had its channel of information for our mind and physical relationship with our living body, but that which satisfies our personality with manifestations that make our life rich and stimulate imagination in their harmony of forms, colours, sounds and movements.' Thus he describes the origin of his direct vision:

I was born in a family which, at this time, was earnestly developing a monotheistic religion based upon the philosophy of the Upanishad... my mind was brought up in an atmosphere of freedom—freedom from the dominance of any creed that had its sanction in the definite authority of some scripture, or in the teaching of some organised body of worshippers... When I look back upon those days, it seems to me that unconsciously I followed the path of my Vedic ancestors, and was inspired by the tropical sky with its suggestion of an uttermost Beyond. The wonder of the gathering clouds hanging heavy with the unshed rain, of the sudden sweep of storms arousing vehement gestures along the line of coconut trees, the fierce loneliness of the blazing summer noon, the silent sunrise behind the dewy veil of autumn morning, kept my mind with the intimacy of a pervasive companionship.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The quotations that follow in this chapter are from *The Religion of Man* unless otherwise indicated.

It is easy to see that, even at the very beginning, his method of acquiring knowledge was direct, through feeling and creative imagination. He adhered to this method throughout his life. His technique of knowing truth was the traditional technique of realisation through direct experience. Thus, his Supreme Person (*Parama Purusha*) or God, or by whatever name he chose to call It at different periods of his life, was not a metaphysical conception, arrived at through a process of systematised thought and reasoning, nor was He knowable or perceptible through an organised set of rituals and beliefs. Though, therefore, Tagore was a 'believer' and a man of prayer in the accepted sense, he was altogether a 'free' man as a poet in the use of his senses, his reason, his will and his psyche.

But let us hear the poet speak about the growth in him of the realisation of oneness or unity of his personal self with the universal self.

Then came my initiation ceremony of Brahminhood when the *gayatri* verse of meditation was given to me ...

This produced a sense of serene exaltation in me, the daily meditation upon the infinite being which unites in one stream of creation my mind and the outer world. Though today I find no difficulty in realising this being as an infinite personality in whom the subject and object are perfectly reconciled, at that time the idea to me was vague. Therefore the current of feeling that it aroused in my mind was indefinite, like the circulation of air—an atmosphere which needed a definite world to complete itself and satisfy me. For it is evident that my religion is a poet's religion, and neither that of an orthodox man of piety nor that of a theologian. ... My religious life has followed the same mysterious line of growth as has my poetical life....

When I was eighteen, a sudden spring breeze of religious experience for the first time came to my life and passed away leaving in my memory a direct message of spiritual reality. One day while I stood watching at early dawn the sun sending out its rays from behind the trees, I suddenly felt as if some ancient mist had in a moment lifted from my sight, and the morning light on the face of the world revealed an inner radiance of joy. The invisible screen of the common place was removed from all things and all men, and their ultimate significance was intensified in my mind; and this is the definition of beauty. That which was memorable in this experience was its human message, the sudden expansion of

my consciousness in the super-personal world of man. The poem I wrote on the first day of my surprise was named 'The Awakening of the Waterfall'. The waterfall, whose spirit lay dormant in its ice-bound isolation, was touched by the sun and, bursting in a cataract of freedom, it found its finality in an unending sacrifice, in a continuous union with the sea. ...

As he grew up he had similar experiences of vision in the midst of the commonplace trivialities of day-to-day life, which went on revealing to him that facts of life 'that were detached and dim found a great unity of meaning' at moments of heightened consciousness. At such moments of experience, the 'unmeaning fragments lost their isolation' and every thing—every sound, every object—became unified in harmony, vision and truth. The poet goes on:

I felt sure that some Being who comprehended me and my world was seeking his best expression in all my experiences, uniting them into an ever-widening individuality which is a spiritual work of art.

To this Being I was responsible; for the creation in me is His as well as mine. It may be that it was the same creative Mind that is shaping the universe to its eternal idea; but in me as a person it had one of its special centres of a personal relationship growing into a deepening consciousness.... It gave me a great joy to feel in my life detachment at the idea of a mystery of a meeting of the two in a creative comradeship. I felt that I had found my religion at last, the religion of Man, in which the infinite became defined in humanity and came close to me so as to need my love and co-operation.

At a much later date, he expressed this idea of his in a significant poem addressed to what he called *Jivan-Devatā*, the Lord of his life, a poem of exceptional charm, rhythm, melody and movement which are untranslatable in English.

Thou who are the innermost Spirit of my being,  
art thou pleased,

Lord of my life?

For I gave to thee my cup  
filled with all the pain and delight  
that the crushed grapes of my heart had surrendered,



I wove with the rhythm of colours and songs the cover for  
thy bed,  
and with the molten gold of my desires  
I fashioned play-things for thy passing hours.

I know not why thou chosest me for thy partner,  
Lord of my life!  
Didst thou store my days and nights,  
my deeds and dreams for the alchemy of thy art,  
and string in the chain of thy music my songs of  
autumn and spring,  
and gather the flowers from my mature moments  
for thy crown?

I see thine eyes gazing at the dark of my heart,  
Lord of my life,  
I wonder if my failures and wrongs are forgiven.  
For many were my days without service  
and nights of forgetfulness;  
futile were the flowers that faded in the shade  
not offered to thee.

Often the tired strings of my lute  
slackened at the strain of thy tunes.  
And often at the ruin of washed hours  
my desolate evenings were filled with tears.

But have my days come to their end at last,  
Lord of my life,  
while my arms round thee grow limp,  
my kisses losing their truth?  
Then break up the meeting of this languid day.  
Renew the old in me in fresh forms of delight;  
and let the wedding come once again  
in a new ceremony of life.

It was this idea, then, which at a later stage evolved into what he came to describe as creative unity in personality explained in his two books, *Creative Unity* and *Personality*, to which I have already referred. Since this conception is intimately related to his total view of life, which I have tried to explain in a previous chapter, as to his religion of man, I shall do no more

than just touch very briefly upon what he meant by creative unity in personality.

From what I have already quoted it would be clear that the poet was a firm believer in the existence of a deep and abiding harmony between man's spirit and the spirit of the universe. Indeed, he held that the 'only way of attaining truth was through the interpenetration of our being into all objects', and that the 'fundamental unity of creation was not simply a philosophical speculation for India; it was her life's object to realise this great harmony in feeling and action'. Facts and things are certainly real, objectively speaking, but their truth and quality lie, the poet seems to argue, in their being cognised by human consciousness; it is through such cognition that man is united and brought into harmony with them. This realisation of unity and harmony in the person of man is what the poet meant by the phrase: 'creative unity in personality.'

It would now be easier to follow what Tagore no doubt meant: The universe was, to begin with, inert, dumb and desolate; but in its evolutionary process, in obedience to the laws of nature, all isolated specks of life, as reflected in its countless multitude of cells, came to be 'bound together into a larger unit, not through aggregation, but through a marvellous quality of complex interrelationship maintaining a perfect co-ordination of functions.' This was, according to the poet, 'the creative principle of unity, the divine mystery of existence, that baffles all analysis. . . . This was the march of evolution ever unfolding the potentialities of life.' But evolution on the physical plane, the poet argues, has a limited range, and it is only with the appearance of man that the course of physical evolution turns a new chapter, 'from an indefinite march of physical aggrandisement to freedom of a more subtle perfection. . . . The process of evolution, which after ages has reached man, must be realised in its unity with him, though in him it assumes a new value and proceeds to a different path. It is a continuous process that finds its meaning in Man; and we must acknowledge that the evolution which Science talks of, is that of Man's universe.'

Tagore then proceeds to argue, if it can be called argument in the logical sense, that the creative principle of unity which he finds in the story of evolution

has ever been that of an inner interrelationship. This is revealed in some of its earlier stages in the evolution of multicellular life on this planet. The most perfect inward expression has been attained by man in his own body. But what is most important of all is the fact that man has also attained its realisation in a more subtle body outside his physical system. He misses himself when isolated; he finds his own larger and truer self in his wide human relationship. His multicellular body is born and it dies; his multi-personal humanity is immortal. In this ideal of unity he realises the eternal in his life and the boundless in his love. The unity becomes not a mere subjective idea, but an energising truth. Whatever name may be given to it, and whatever form it symbolises, the consciousness of this unity is spiritual, and our effort to be true to it is our religion.

## 3

Shorn of its literary and imaginative mode of expression, Tagore's interpretation of the story of the evolution of man as a physical entity, his vision of the spiritual significance of evolution, is not perhaps at bottom different from Julian Huxley's. Indeed, Tagore, the poet, anticipates much of what Huxley, the biologist, has to say on his theory of evolutionary or scientific humanism.<sup>1</sup> Huxley argues, strictly as a student of science, that the evolution of man as a physical being has reached a dead end and that further evolution of the species can only be in the region of intellectual and spiritual values. What Huxley argues on the basis of his scientific discipline, Tagore seems to do on the basis of his perceptual experience and personal realisation.

Tagore therefore posits, as he had experienced himself, the existence of Supreme Self in man, the indwelling, the innermost one that regulates and guides the life of man. Our inner faculty 'helps us to find our relationship with this Supreme Self of man, the universe of personality. The faculty is our luminous imagination, which in its higher stage is special to man. It offers us that vision of wholeness.' The purpose of this is 'to arouse in us the sense of perfection which is our true sense of immortality. For perfection dwells ideally in Man the Eternal

<sup>1</sup> Julian Huxley, *Evolution in Action*, Harper, 1953.



... what is unique in man is the development of his consciousness, which gradually deepens and widens the realisation of his immortal being, the perfect, the eternal. It inspires those creations of his that reveal the divinity in him—which is his humanity—in the varied manifestations of truth, goodness and beauty, in the freedom of activity which is not for his use but for his ultimate expression.' Indeed the very core of his religion of man is this divinity of man which, in other words, is the humanity of God, according to the poet. To put it in Upanishadic words Man is God or the Supreme Person, the *Parama Purusha*, and God is nothing but the quintessence of the human qualities that we experience in the perfect and the eternal man. Tagore believes that in nothing can we ever 'go beyond man in all that we know and feel'; God there is because He is in the person of the man who is immeasurable, illimitable and immortal. 'Our universe', he says, 'is the sum total of what Man feels, knows, imagines and reasons to be, and of whatever is knowable to him now or in another time.... The *Isā* of our Upanishad, the Super Soul, which permeates all moving things, is the God of this human universe whose mind we share in all true knowledge, love and service, and whom to reveal in ourselves through renunciation of self is the highest end of life.'

Tagore's God is not thus a cosmic God, nor an object of scientific investigation. He is a human God, the embodiment of man's inner nature; He is to be sensed, perceived and experienced through unity and harmony, through love and sacrifice.

To realise the unity of one's personal self with the universal self, to discipline one's self in such a way as to realise and experience, within oneself, the permeation of the Supreme Person, to deepen and expand one's inner self in love, piety, charity, sacrifice and service of humanity, to rejoice in the experience and expression of the creative surplus in one's self, that is, in creative activities—these, then, constitute Tagore's religion of man, these justify man's creation and existence in this universe. In the lives of prophets, saints and seers, in the lives of great men and women of creative art, of science, of thought and action, in the love and sacrifice of the common man as much as in poetry and painting, in music and sculpture he finds the truth of this religion revealed. In fact he refers, again and

again, to the seers of the Vedas and the Upanishads, to the Buddha and Zarathustra, to the mystic songs of illumination of the *Bauls* of Bengal, to the Vaishnava lyrics of love and sacrifice, to reveal how the spirit in man has always longed for the touch of the divinity in him, despite his preoccupation with the material demands of life. Not that Tagore ignores these material demands; nor does he belittle the intellectual pursuits of man, his triumphs in the realm of science. Indeed these he highly values and he would take fullest advantage of them, but he is, nevertheless, very acutely conscious that man, in avocation of this nature, does not exceed himself, is not a creator, and, therefore, he cannot experience that freedom of spirit which is his birthright.

This, then, in brief and in prosaic terms, is Tagore's religion of man, a religion that is expressed, within him, with joyous conviction and in profound affirmation. We may remember that he was evolving this faith in stages and the final enunciation came in a given context of a human situation in the world. If we keep this context in mind we should be able to understand better the implication of his words when he says:

The real tragedy, however, does not lie in the risk of our material security but in the obscuration of Man himself in the human world. In the creative activities of his soul Man realises his surroundings as his larger self, instinct with his own life and love. But in his ambition he deforms and defiles it with the callous handling of his voracity. His world of utility, assuming a gigantic proportion, reacts upon his inner nature and hypnotically suggests to him a scheme of the universe which is an abstract system. In such a world there can be no question of *mukti*, the freedom in truth. [And yet] this *mukti* is in the truth that dwells in the ideal man...

... Man, suckled at the wolf's breasts, sheltered in the brute's den, brought up in the prowling habit of depredation, suddenly discovers that he is Man, and that his true power lies in yielding up his brute power for the freedom of spirit.

The God of humanity has arrived at the gates of the ruined temple of the tribe. Though he has not yet found his altar, I ask the men of simple faith, wherever they may be in the world, to bring their offering of sacrifice to him, and to believe that it is far better to be wise and worshipful than to be clever and supercilious. I ask them to claim the right of manhood to be friends of men,

and not the right of a particular proud race or nation which may boast of the fatal quality of being the rulers of men.

It was in welcoming the Eternal and Immortal Man of his faith that he, in the context of the given situation just referred to, wrote the following poem:

There, there comes the Man Eternal  
and the dust and grass of this mortal earth  
are ashiver all around.

The gods blow their conches  
and men beat their drums of victory—  
Hark, the moment of the great birth has come.  
The blind gates of the fort of dark night  
lie in dust broken into pieces.

'Fear not, Fear not', rings the call  
from the peak of the rising sun  
the call of a new life.

And the sky is rent asunder  
by thousands of voices:

Victory, Victory to the awakening of Man.

Is this religion of man, as conceived and given expression to by Tagore, in consonance or not with traditional Indian thought on Absolute Reality and on this world of man?

It is not easy to answer the question in one word. If our hieratic scholastic philosophy is to be taken as an indication of our way of life, traditional Indian attitude and approach to life must have been rather other-worldly and anti-secular and hence anti-humanistic. According to this philosophy, the central theme and ultimate goal of life is God or *Parama Brahman* of Brahmanical theology and metaphysics, *Nirvāṇa* or *Sūnya* of Buddhist, or *Kaivalya* of Jain metaphysics. These are pure and abstract metaphysical conceptions, intellectually comprehensible, but are not living entities amenable to the perceptual experience of man. Moreover, intellectual comprehension of the Vedantic God, the Buddhist *Nirvāṇa* or *Sūnya* or the Jain *Kaivalya* presupposes absolute negation of the world of name and form (*nāma* and *rūpa*), that is, of the world of the senses and hence this worldly, secular life of man. Absolute *vairāgya* or non-attachment, renunciation, is, therefore, an imperative pre-requisite



of God-search. Furthermore this absolute, monistic interpretation of Brahman, the absolute reality, should obviously be, as it indeed is, against all forms of art which by their very nature are dependent on the world of 'name' and 'form' which this world of man essentially is. Indeed, the traditional scholastic hieratic attitude and approach to this world of man cannot be called humanistic in any sense.

On the other hand, Tagore's attitude and approach to life and his conception of the religion of man was essentially human, secular; the world he speaks of is essentially the world of man.

Deliverance is not for me in renunciation. I feel the  
embrace of freedom in a thousand bonds of delight.  
Thou ever pourest for me the fresh draught of thy wine  
of various colours and fragrance, filling this earthen  
vessel to the brim.

My world will light its hundred different lamps with thy  
flame and place them before the altar of thy temple.  
No, I will never shut the door of my senses. The delights  
of sight and hearing and touch will bear thy delight.  
Yes, all my illusions will burn into illumination of joy,  
and all my desires ripen into fruits of love.<sup>1</sup>

Here, then, is a complete negation of the absolute monistic attitude of traditional Indian thought as recorded in scholastic texts. Tagore's God is not a metaphysical abstraction but a human, worldly reality; the God-in-Man or Man-in-God is to be perceived and experienced by the human senses, by man's inner being, not merely comprehended by knowledge, and is therefore a living entity. Indeed, according to him, there is no God beyond man; 'man can never go beyond man in all that they know and feel', he argues. There can, therefore, be no question of renouncing the world of 'name' and 'form' no consideration of negation of the world of senses. His idea of *mukti* or deliverance thus seems to be somewhat akin to Śaṅkara's idea of *jīvanmukti* or deliverance in the midst of the bondage of worldly life, admittedly a lower form of *mukti*, according to the Vedantic conception. And since this was so, art, indeed all forms of creative activity and expression, had their full play in

<sup>1</sup> English *Gitanjali*.

the progressive march of man towards his *mukti* or freedom of spirit.

But, then, there is another tradition in India, a tradition very much different from, perhaps even antithetic to, the hieratic and scholastic tradition I have just spoken of. This tradition, as I have pointed out in a previous chapter, was pronouncedly humanistic, and Tagore seems to have been the first discoverer in our time of this tradition. It was he who showed us that at one time this tradition was very much alive, active and potent, but was forced to lie dormant, or flow as an undercurrent during the centuries when creative and spiritual life in India became bound by the fetters of intellectual rigidity and metaphysical abstraction, and religious life by a set of lifeless dogmas, rites and rituals. Tagore pointed out that in the Atharva Veda and the Upanishads, in the Buddhist *Dhammapada*, the *Jālakas* and *Avadānas*, in the songs of the medieval mystic saint-poets and poet-saints, in the Sanskrit epics and classical dramas, in the Vaishṇava *padāvalis* and in the songs and ballads of our common rural folks, this humanistic tradition of God-in-Man or Man-in-God was very much in evidence; indeed man was the central theme and ultimate goal of experience and realisation by man, and that in this world of man, in this world of 'name' and 'form'. There was no disparagement in this tradition of the life of the senses and emotions, far less any negation of the world of 'name' and 'form'; the total approach was human and even somewhat secular. Yet, at the same time, the tradition carried an overriding emphasis on, and an insistent reminding of, the life of the spirit in man, of the ever-present divinity in him because of which man was man and not an animal.

Generally speaking, absolute authority of traditional religions, sacredness of religious canons, rigid adherence to the caste system, and faith in magical rites and symbols constituted the main pattern of socio-religious thinking and behaviour in post-classical and medieval India, as much as they did in medieval West or elsewhere in the world. In the realm of social relations the various religious orders played a very influential part, and a somewhat feudalistic hierarchy of status was accepted without question. Since religious dogmas were held in supreme reverence, all scholarship and learning tended to be scholastic, and there was hardly any free thinking. As a corollary, cultural life

was mainly confined to the upper classes. As the over-all approach to life was other-worldly, religion was divorced from secular life, since the latter was considered low and ignoble. In a pattern of thinking and behaviour as this, small value was attached to man as such.

But it seems that even from very early days there was another tradition in India which had a different valuation of man as such and which seems to have recognised divinity as inherent in man and attainable in this and not in the other world. When the *Atharvan* sage says:

*Yatrāmṛitam cha mṛityuscha purushadhisamāhita  
samudre yasya nāḍyaḥ purushadhi samāhitāḥ—*  
*Atharva Veda, 10.7.15.*

Life and Death are immersed together in Man;  
the Great Ocean pulsates in the veins of Man.

or, when he says,

*Ye puruṣe Brahma viduste viduḥ parameshthinam—*  
*Atharva Veda, 10.7.17.*

He who sees the Brahman in Man, sees Brahman installed  
in the supremest of altars.

or, when Bhīṣmadeva counsels Yudhishthira,

*Guhyaṁ Brahma tadidaṁ bravimi na mānushachchhresh-  
ṭhataraṁ hi kiñchit—Mahābhārataṁ, Śāntiparva, 299, 20.*  
What I shall tell you now is the deepest (highest) of all  
truths: there is no deeper truth than Man.

We seem to have an echo of that tradition. In some of the stories of the Upanishads and in their general teaching and atmosphere, but more in the life and teachings of such heterodox religious and spiritual leaders as Gautama, the Buddha, and his followers, in the Buddhist *gāthās* and *avadānas*, there is a recognition of a valuation of man above caste and above stereotyped symbols of traditional religion; there is also a stress on love and compassion and a regard for reason and ethical values despite irrational faith in magical practices and mystical experiences.



But it is in such medieval saints as Rāmānanda (14th century), Kabīr (1440-1518), Nāmadeva (c. 1425-1538), Chaitanya (1485-1533), Tukārām (c. 1608-1649), and Ekanāth (died 1608), to name only a few of them, and their followers, that we find, for the first time in Indian tradition, a direct denunciation of the systems of esoteric religious practices which are regarded as endowing charismatic authority on those who practise them and who as such are considered superior to others. All of them denounced, in some form or other, traditional religious rites and symbols as well as religious differences, stressed on love (*prema*), on inner devotion (*bhakti*), on direct and evident human experience, and on unity of all religions in their essence. A change in the valuation of man was also equally noticeable in what they practised and preached. First, these great leaders of thought were all against discrimination between man and man as based upon traditional authority; some of them were even against discrimination between man and woman. Regardless of descent, race or caste they held that love for and devotion to God, good and simple life, service to people and compassion for others were the criteria by which men and women were to be judged. Some of them, Chaitanya, for instance, valued man with his in-dwelling spirit of love and compassion, as the supreme truth, 'than which there was no greater truth'. Secondly, an implication of this worldliness, a certain regard for the life of matter, a stress on action in social life, and a definite layistic tendency in religious life were, also, characteristic of the songs and teachings of many of these leaders of thought. Here are two quotations chosen at random from the songs of Kabīr:

Dance, my heart! dance today with joy.  
The strains of love fill the days and nights with music,  
and the world is listening to its melodies.  
Mad with joy, life and death dance to the rhythm of this  
music...

Why put on the robe of the monk, and live aloof from the  
world in lonely price?<sup>1</sup>

In the home is the true union, in the home is enjoyment of  
life.

Why should I forsake my home and wander in the forest?<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Songs of Kabir*, II, 103, p. 80.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 65, p. 87.

These lines, speaking parenthetically, might as well have been written by Tagore himself. Service to fellow men and esteem of ethical values were also two other very important features that characterised religious thought in medieval India. Let us listen to Kabir once more.

I do not ring the temple bell:  
I do not set the idol on its throne:  
I do not worship the image with flowers.  
It is not the austerities that mortify the flesh which are  
pleasing to the Lord,  
When you leave off your clothes and kill your senses,  
you do not please the Lord:  
The man who is kind and who practises righteousness,  
who remains passive amidst the affairs of the world  
who considers all creatures on earth as his own self,  
He attains the Immortal Being, the true God is ever with  
me."<sup>1</sup>

Tagore was the interpreter of this medieval tradition, as I have already said more than once. These medieval saints were Man-in-God and experienced their God-in-Man in their day-to-day life of actualities. It was on this humanistic tradition, made his own and enriched by his personal experience, that he built the edifice of his personal faith and of his Religion of Man, and sought to describe it in the terms of a traditional Indian poet belonging to the modern age.

A further source of inspiration and support, and that, I believe, to a far greater measure, he found in the literary, musical and plastic arts of India, in other words, in man's creative expressions. It is in these arts that man created God in his own image and interpreted their God-visions in terms of human life. Otherwise the poetry of the *Mahābhārata* and the dramas of Kālidāsa, the paintings of Ajanta, the sculptures of Ellora and Elephanta, for instance, would not have been possible. It is in these creative arts that man, in the words of Tagore, exceeds himself, gives himself wings to fly and roam in the regions of the spirit that dwells in him. In his own world of creation man finds his self which is the embodiment of the Eternal Man.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 22, pp. 108-9.

But, for centuries in India this Eternal Man lay buried under the debris, submerged under the dead-weight of an ossified religion of lifeless icons, meaningless dogmas and obscure rituals on the one hand, and a hieratic, abstract, and essentially priestly and scholastic philosophy on the other. The Eternal Man, 'the idea of the humanity of our God, or the divinity of Man' was, therefore, waiting to be resurrected. It called for a God-in-Man or Man-in-God to do it. And Tagore did it with all the strength of conviction and joy of affirmation he could command. He gave the call, we must remember, in terms and accents of a poet and seer.



## 12. Total View of Life and Aesthetic Ideal

LONG AGO, a talented Bengali scholar, speaking on Tagore, said something to this effect: 'Rabindranath is a poet of revealing beauty and widening vision, a composer of exquisite charm and emotional intensity, a searching philosopher of intense intellectual vigour, a writer of genius and profundity, a great savant, but above all he is a *rishi*, a seer.' He said much else, but in describing his many-sided genius, it was to the *rishi* in Tagore, that he paid the highest tribute. And this was rather a conventional assessment of him. Rabindranath, the son of *Maharshi* (the great seer) Devendranath, nurtured in the contemplative and introspective ideology of the Upanishads, the composer of deeply moving and poignant spiritual songs, the author of *Naivedya* (Offerings), *Gītānjali* (Song-offerings), *Gītīmālya* (Garland of Songs) and *Gītālī* (Bunch of Songs), of the Santiniketan series of sermons, of *Sādhanā*, *Personality*, *Creative Unity* and *The Religion of Man*, may well strike us above of all as a *rishi*, a mystic, a prophet and a seer. In fact, he embodies, more or less, every feature of the traditional Indian ideal of the seer and the prophet: the rapt self-absorption, the deep introspection, vast and profound knowledge and wisdom, the gigantic power and radiance of personality. To be sure, we do not exaggerate when we call Tagore a *rishi*.

Nor, according to the Indian view of things, is it an unjust description. That the poet, or the artist for that matter, is a revealer, a creator, is frankly admitted from the earliest times known to our history. The Sanskrit word *Kavi* (poet) is already known to the *Rig-veda*, and philologically it is derived from a root that means 'to show', 'to reveal'. *Kavi*, therefore, means 'one who shows or reveals'; but before he is able to show, he himself must be able to see. This is exactly why a poet or an artist is called a 'seer'. Indeed, certain Vedic passages describe the poet as 'possessing eyes that penetrate through the three worlds', and so on and so forth. In our contemporary evaluation too, as in all previous ages, a poet or an artist of rare genius is described as a seer. Besides, Tagore possessed, in

common with all authentic Indian seers of bygone days, the great and inexpressible spiritual quality of being able to talk, when he chose to talk at all, in symbols, parables, similes, metaphors and analogies that are simple and direct, and this, even in his ordinary conversation, was, more often than not, lit by wit, the wit of a most illuminating character, glowing with an incandescence that revealed pearls of wisdom strewn about in easy and spontaneous charity. Indian tradition associates this kind of homely but profoundly illuminating way of talking and behaving with the seer and the saint.

Personally I came to experience the magic of his personality during the last twenty years of his life, when he was already a venerable patriarch. He was a very busy man, one of the busiest and most hard-worked persons I have ever come across, yet whenever we went to see him it never appeared to us that he was doing anything or that he had anything to do in the world except to talk to us. He never made us feel that we were disturbing him; he always had about him an atmosphere of complete ease and leisure, as if he had no worries, no burden to carry.

I have also seen him countless times half reclining on an arm-chair, all by himself, for hours, doing nothing, absolutely nothing, making no bodily movement, absolutely motionless, just reclining and looking out, gazing at the pre-dawn glow on the horizon, or at the parched plains of Santiniketan panting in the afternoon sun, or at the darkness of the *amābasyā* sky studded with stars and the void in front lightly pierced by fireflies. I have seen him completely withdrawing and retiring within himself in the midst of company and yet being there all the time, as if with full participation of his being. I have heard from the members of his family and his colleagues that he used to sip slowly for medicinal purposes a full tumbler of diluted juice of *nīm* leaves without even the slightest twist of facial muscles. I have heard also from his associates and attendants that he had tremendous power of bearing physical pain and suffering. A story is current that he was once stung by a poisonous scorpion, and the suffering was intense. But Tagore induced himself to the belief that it was not his self that had been stung, but a person named Rabindranath Tagore, and then he experienced no pain at all! Having seen with my

own eyes how he suffered once after his erysipelas operation, when he was already past seventy-seven, and again before and after his operation on his enlarged prostate, which proved to be his last illness, I am prepared to believe that story. On both occasions he suffered unspeakable physical agony, but he bore it with quiet dignity and he derived from it an exalted creative experience. During his earlier illness, on recovering his consciousness, the first thing he did was to make a remarkable painting on a piece of plywood, and a day or two later he wrote the following poem, published here in its English rendering:<sup>1</sup>

This body of mine—  
the carrier of the burden of a past—  
seemed to me like an exhausted cloud  
slipping off from the listless arm  
of the morning.  
I felt freed from its clasp  
in the heart of an incorporeal light  
at the farthest shore  
of evanescent things.

But during his last illness he could not even move in bed, or, what was worse, write with his own hand. He used to dictate and of such dictated poems here is the English rendering of one in which one can see how the intense suffering of physical pain was being transmuted into creative expression:<sup>2</sup>

Here in the universe  
Revolves a gigantic wheel of pain;  
Stars and planets burst;  
Sparks of far-flung, fiery dust  
Scatter at a gaping speed  
Enveloping first creation's anguish.  
In the armoury of pain  
Glowing on the stretches of consciousness  
Torture instruments clang;  
Bleeding wounds gape.  
Man's body is so small  
His strength of suffering so immense. ✓  
Where chaos and creation meet

<sup>1</sup> Translation by Krishna Kripalani.

<sup>2</sup> Translation by Amiya Chakrabarti.



Why does man hold up his fiery cup  
 In the weird festival of the gods,  
 Titan-drunk—O why  
 Fill his clay body, deliriously  
 With the red tide of tears?  
 Each moment offers value.  
 Man's sacrifice,  
 His burning body—  
 Can anything compare  
 In all the suns and stars?  
 Such prowess, endurance  
 Indifference to death—  
 This triumphal march where hundreds  
 Trample embers  
 To reach the limit of sorrow—  
 Where else is such a guest,  
 Where such a pilgrimage,  
 Such service, breaking like water through  
 Igneous rocks,  
 Where else such endless stores of love?

If this is how he bore his suffering in his old age and in the midst of a grave physical crisis, he did so with the same equanimity even in his earlier years and in trifle situations. I have seen him (and who at Santiniketan or in Calcutta has not?) writing for hours at a stretch seated on an ordinary wooden chair, uncushioned, straight-backed, slightly bent over a simple unadorned four-legged table, with no fan revolving overhead, and this in the dry burning month of *Vaisākh* (April-May)!

I hope to be excused for this long detour or digression. But I had to make it on purpose.

One who knows anything about the Indian tradition would perhaps agree that these are attitudes and attributes which we usually associate with seers and sages, with disciplined men of wisdom and grace. There can be no doubt that Tagore grew up to belong to that tribe.

Yet, I believe, when Tagore's work in various spheres, the abundant versatility of his genius, is taken as a whole, and that, indeed, is the surest and most convenient way of judging the greatness or otherwise of a person, it is correct to describe him as a poet or, better, as an artist, an artist in life. It is perhaps true to say that no man in the whole range of known history

can rival his all-comprehending genius, equally splendid in thought, in creation and in action. Since the language in which he spoke and wrote is Bengali, in Bengal he is not only an institution but a tradition, a whole culture in himself; for it was he who brought life into the moribund culture of the Bengali middle class, who liberated the Bengali language from all the fetters of an outmoded tradition and gave it freedom and variety and power. Moreover, he introduced into it a subtle and delicate beauty, and made middle-class cultured Bengalis finely susceptible to a pattern of art in daily life. But Tagore's gifts are not confined to Bengal alone. Everyone knows that it was he who by his creative articulation inspired our first national resurgence, that no one realised the Indian tradition more comprehensively in life and action, that Indian culture had had no better a spokesman, and that none gave it a wider vision and a deeper content.

His contribution to world culture are hardly less significant. Even these do not exhaust him. His importance in the social and political evolution of India, in contemporary education and cultural movements, is well-known. He has brought Indian philosophy nearer to our comprehension by his graceful and clear exposition and has creatively interpreted our national history and culture. By reading his poems and short stories, by listening to his music and by witnessing the staging of his symbolic plays, our own sensibilities become keener; we can then apprehend the mystery and understand the impalpable meaning that haunts the world of the senses, and enjoy the vision of the one and unique incandescent spirit informing and permeating the world's diversity. All this is true. Yet, when from a distance we consider these great achievements, it is his genius as an artist, an artist in life, that seems to tower above all else.

Let us try to make this clear as we proceed.

It is to be noted that Tagore is a poet, an artist, not simply in his poems which, one has to admit, are essentially melodic, and not only in his songs that are intensely lyrical. Everybody knows that many of his short stories, even a few of his novels, are poetical too, not lyrical, be it noted, but are built on moods, feelings and atmospheres as much as are his more significant dramas which, moreover, are dramas of ideas rather than of action, essentially poetic, symbolic and musical. Neither

the dramas nor the short stories are built on themes of human conflict in terms of the objective facts of life, in Tagore's words, of 'the lightless world of facts'. But Tagore is also a poet in almost everything that he has written, whether it is an essay on the currents of Indian history or on a contemporary socio-political problem, whether it is an academic address, a satirical or polemical pamphlet, a piece of literary-criticism or an interpretation of a theological or metaphysical point. In all this he speaks more in terms of images and symbols, similes and metaphors rather than in the language of sound logic, and in order to convey what he wants to say he relies more on sensibility than on sense, more on suggestiveness than on precision of meaning. There is also an undeniable emphasis on subjective impressions and a conscious attempt at reduction of complexities to a unitary and harmonious order. If he has a thesis, as he always has, he does not rely on ratiocination to convince us of it, but presents it to us in such a way that it takes direct and immediate possession of the readers. Our intellect retires, so to speak, as the language and rhythm cast a spell over us, as the poet's powerful vision becomes our own. The atmosphere that he evokes, the simple yet beautiful and persuasive images, symbols and metaphors—these take the place of argument in his prose, and disarm critical objection, sometimes even hinder an objective approach. The whole point of argument is that his method and technique of 'seeing', that is, of perception and conception, and of 'doing', that is, of expression, are the method and technique of a 'poet'. The Sanskrit and Bengali word *kavi* does not only mean a writer of verses, far less of lyrics alone, but also a composer of songs and a writer of dramas, indeed, all creative artists in the field of letters. Sanskrit poetics understood this word in a much wider sense than we do it today. It is in this wider sense that I have been using the term 'poet' throughout.

Yet one has to admit in the same breath that Tagore's intellectual abilities are also of the highest order, sharp and rigorous and sensitive, and are on a par with his highly introspective poetic imagination. He employs reason, and that to a very high degree, but his reason is imaginative reason as distinguished from historical reason; so, he chooses to speak in pictures, images and symbols. His knowledge and intellect show



gaps but they are few; his yearnings never disappear in a maze of vague expressions. He did not deny his senses, nor did he shut himself up in an abstract and formless world of contemplation; if he had, he could never have been a poet, an artist, far less could he achieve the greatness he did. To perceive with the senses what appears and to understand with the intellect what seems to be beyond logical meaning or reason, that is integral to Tagore's way of life, his *sādhana* or discipline. Since he has succeeded in this discipline, his poetry is great, he is great. The way of life just referred to is the way of the poet, of the artist as Tagore perceived and understood it. His technique is the technique of *prāṇa*, the vital life force, and not so much of *mana*, the intellect, which he seems to have allowed to play a secondary role in respect of his artistic creations at any rate, and the building up of his personality.

## 2

This characteristic technique is directly derived from his conception of art, of individual and universal life, and of their interrelation, in a word, from his total view of things.

A short exposition of this world view is, therefore, necessary in order to make it clear why I have chosen to describe Tagore as a poet, an artist, an artist in life. The view, which I will try to explain below, in his own words as far as possible, has been growing in him slowly and by stages, from his early youth, through feeling and direct experience of the world of nature and man. One can trace his basic attitude, which seems to have taken shape gradually, in many of his early poems. From time to time he sought to formulate his ideas on the subject, more or less systematically, in Bengali, and in his usual, inimitable style, with the help of images, symbols and analogies, by way of explaining himself. Later, in the full maturity of his life, he went a step farther, and spelt his ideas out in the form of essays and addresses in English. They are to be found notably in *Sādhana* (1913), *Personality* (1917), *Creative Unity* (1922) and *The Religion of Man* (1930). These ideas are recurrent and interpenetrate all his creative work, his essays, sermons, short stories and dramas as much as his poems and songs, and

are embodied and concretised in what we may call his creative living and personality; or, to put it in a different manner, Tagore is the personal embodiment of these ideas and approaches. One must, however, point out that he is not the original formulator of the principles of Creative Unity and Personality, but he is certainly the only creative interpreter in modern times of these principles that originated with the seers of the Upanishads, that were deeply felt and experienced by the total collective Indian life and living, reinforced by our medieval saint-poets and poet-saints. Nurtured in the tradition and atmosphere of the Upanishads and nourished in the formative and maturer years of his life by them as well as by the Sufi and Vaishnava mysticism, by the songs and experiences of the long line of our medieval poet-prophets, Tagore easily imbibed those principles and made them his own: indeed, they became the sap and breath of his life, the very essence of his being and becoming. His life he bore as a testimony to what he realised as truth.

In an essay on the 'Relation of the Individual to the Universe' in *Sādhana* (Realisation of Life), Tagore writes '.... the only way of attaining truth is through the interpenetration of our being into all objects. To realise this great harmony between man's spirit and the spirit of the world was the endeavour' of India that 'put all her emphasis on the harmony that exists between the individual and the universal.... the great fact is that we are in harmony with nature; that man can use the forces of nature for his own purpose only because his power is in harmony with the power which is universal.... The fundamental unity of creation was not simply a philosophical speculation for India; it was her life-object to realise this great harmony in feeling and in action.'

In the Introduction that sets forth the main thesis of his book, *Creative Unity*, Tagore says: 'It costs me nothing to feel that I am; it is no burden to me.... It is some untold mystery of unity in me, that has the simplicity of the infinite and reduces the immense mass of multitude to a single point. This One in me knows the universe of the many. But, in whatever it knows, it knows the One in different aspects.... This One in me is creative. Its creations are a pastime, through which it gives expression to an ideal of unity in its endless show of variety. Such are

its pictures, poems, music, in which it finds joy only because they reveal the perfect forms of an inherent unity. This One in me not only seeks unity in knowledge for its understanding and creates images of unity for its delight; it also seeks union in love for its fulfilment.' In his essay on 'The Poet's Religion' (which, incidentally, is his own religion), in the same book, he writes: 'Poetry and the arts cherish in them the profound faith of man in the unity of his being with all existence, the final truth of which is the truth of personality. It is a religion *directly apprehended*,<sup>1</sup> and not a system of metaphysics to be analysed and argued'. In another essay on 'The Creative Ideal', also in the same book, the poet defines consciousness of personality in men as the consciousness of unity in themselves. The *person* in man is thus, in abstract terms, the progressive realisation of unity with the infinite, the universal (or the divine, the Supreme Person, as the poet often chooses to characterise it) in the finitude of the individual man and his eternal creative craving for the infinite and universal. Personality and Creative Unity are thus really one and the same thing.

But let us listen to the poet himself for a little while more. In the same essay referred to above he says: 'The consciousness of personality, which is the consciousness of unity in ourselves, becomes prominently distant when coloured by joy or sorrow, or some other emotion. . . . In the creation of art, therefore, the energy of an emotional ideal is necessary, as its unity is not like that of a crystal, passive and inert . . . In everyday life our personality moves in a narrow circle of immediate self-interest . . . our feelings and events, in their vehement self-assertion, ignore their unity with the All . . . But art gives our personality the disinterested freedom of the eternal, there to find it in its true perspective . . . *To detach the individual idea from its confinement of everyday facts and to give its soaring wings the freedom of the universal: this is the function of poetry.*'<sup>2</sup>

And, finally, the following quotations from his two essays on 'What is Art' and 'The World of Personality', in *Personality*, are very relevant to the point at issue. 'Man as a knower, is not fully himself,—his mere information does not reveal him. But as a person, he is the organic man . . . The principal object

<sup>1</sup> Italics by the present author.

<sup>2</sup> Italics by the present author.



of art, being the expression of personality, and not of that which is abstract and analytical, it necessarily uses the language of picture and music. This has led to a confusion in our thought that the object of art is the production of beauty; whereas beauty in art has been the mere instrument and not its complete and ultimate significance. . . . Analytical treatment will not help us in discovering what is the vital point in art. For the true principle of art is principle of unity. . . . Matter taken by itself is an abstraction which can be dealt with by science; while manner, which is merely manner, is an abstraction which comes under the laws of rhetoric. But when they are indissolubly one, then they find their harmonics in our personality, which is an organic complex of matter and manner, thoughts and things, motives and actions. Therefore . . . all abstract ideas are out of place in true art, where, in order to gain admission, they must come under the disguise of personification. . . . one effort of man's personality is to transform everything with which he has any true concern into the human. And art is like the spread of vegetation, to show how far man has reclaimed the desert for his own. . . . our world of consciousness does not accurately coincide with the world of facts, because *personality surpasses facts on every side*.<sup>1</sup> It is conscious of its infinity and creates from its abundance; and because, in art, things are challenged from the standpoint of the immortal Person, those which are important in our customary life of facts become unreal when placed on the pedestal of art. . . . What is it in man that asserts its immortality in spite of the obvious fact of death? . . . It is the personality of man, conscious of its inexhaustible abundance; it has the paradox in it that is more than itself; it is more than as it is seen, as it is known, as it is used. And this consciousness of the infinite in the personal man, ever strives to make the whole world its own. In Art the person in us is sending its answer to the Supreme Person, who reveals Himself to us in a world of endless beauty across the lightless world of facts.' Again, 'Reality (the infinite giving himself out through finitude) is the expression of personality. . . . If my own personality leaves the centre of my world, then in a moment it loses all its attributes. From this I know that my world exists in relation to me. . . . the ultimate reality is in the Person and not in the law and substance.'<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Italics by the present author.

A man with modern outlook will perhaps find much fault with the principles of art, of the individual and universal life as enunciated above, and few will agree to equate this sort of *personal* humanism of the poet with the scientific humanism of the positivists or the evolutionary humanism of the biologists, such as rule the humanist thought of the contemporary world. But it is one thing to disagree, and quite another to be able to understand, appreciate, and explain the creative works and other activities of the personality of an artist of Tagore's stature. To be able to do so, it is not enough to judge his writings and activities merely by analysing his craftsmanship and efficiency, his competence and effectiveness. Tagore's claim to greatness is to be judged by the organic wholeness of his creative activities, by the profundity of his wisdom, by the depth and breadth of his vision and imagination, and by the sharpness, yet elusiveness, of his senses and sensibilities.

It is, therefore, necessary to understand the full significance of Tagore's conception of the totality of things, and, when we have done this, we will readily see that through everything that he has written and done he was seeking to realise the infinite in the finitude, to realise the unity of the individual and the particular with the universal, to find the harmonies of matter and manner in his personality, meeting and challenging things from the standpoint of the Immortal Person, sending his answers to the Supreme Person, and reclaiming the deserts of the world of men and things for his own. Indeed, his work and thought and action are all of a piece and they are expressions of his personality, and it is in terms of his conception of human personality that we have to look at the organic evolution and sum-total of his life's creation, and, shall we say, also of his social, political and educational activities, for they too stem from this basic conception of the Creative Unity in Personality and can be therefore better understood from this point of view.

It is important to point out in this connection that in pure Upanishadic terms this expression of Personality in art and life is another word for what is called *ātma-saṁskṛiti* or culture of the self in man, as the *Āitareya Brāhmaṇa* puts it. The relevant passage of the text reads, in effect, as follows: all human arts, including those of procreation and culture of the self (*ātma-saṁskṛiti*), are to be in conformity or harmony with the divine, that is, they

must be natural, organic. Art, according to this view, is but a means of self-culture, and self-culture consists in making the self conform to or harmonise with the Divine. It is significant indeed that Tagore too looked upon poetry as a means of self-culture, for, in discussing the basic import of Bengali rhyme and metre (*chhanda*), he states clearly that 'in poetry we want to sense this self-divination in a pure and free, yet in a varied, manner'. It is thus clear that with Tagore art was a means to an end, and that the end was an unceasing unfoldment of personality, a continuous culture of the self in harmony with the Divine. By his own admission as well as by the logic of ancient Indian aesthetics, he was not seeking to create forms of beauty, since 'beauty in art has been the mere instrument and not its complete and ultimate significance'. If he was attracted by beauty and succeeded in creating endless forms of beauty, that was because 'through our sense of beauty we realise harmony in the universe,' since 'beauty is the harmony realised in things which are bound by law'.

It will now, I hope, be appreciated why I have chosen to describe Tagore as, by and large, a poet, an artist, an artist in life, for his principal interest was the culture of his self, the expression of his personality. His achievements are those of his personality, his shortcomings, too, likewise, are those of his personality.

## 3

What is Tagore's attitude to the 'real', objective world of men and things? Is he quite indifferent to or oblivious of it, as one would tend to conclude from his conception of the Creative Unity of Personality, except in so far as it provides him with delightful or painful sensuous experience?

Early in life he wrote a brilliant series of essays in the form of a dialogue, *Pañchabhūter Diary* (The Diary of the Five Elements, 1897-98), in which he interpreted reality of the work-a-day world as providing the artist with that degree of intimate relationship which enabled him to transcend that reality itself. In essence this view of reality in its relation to art and aesthetics, was not very different from what our ancient writers on *alan-kāra* had said about art as having its genesis in the surplus of



human experience of reality. Indeed, in his maturer years this conception of the 'surplus' Tagore made his own, and more than once, tried to explain what it meant and implied. The creative instinct in man, according to this conception, is not limited by immediate or remote material needs, by social or ethical values, or by intellectual or scientific aims and purposes; indeed it transcends them, since this quality of transcendence is inherent in the human species, and it is in creative art and science, as much as in religious and spiritual discipline and expression, that this quality finds its fullest expression. Tagore's implicit and explicit acceptance of this conception was not the results of any systematic ratiocination, but of actual experience of life which he took pains to explain again and again. Reality with Tagore is only a part of his total and integral view of man's Creative Unity in Personality, as already explained.

The question is easier to answer in the light of what he says in respect of 'facts' and 'objects'. Not that he does not recognise the world of facts and objects, but he would assert that in art man revealed himself in relationship with objects, and not the objects themselves. 'Personality surpasses facts', he says, 'on every side...when facts are looked upon as mere facts, having their chain of consequences in the world of facts, they are rejected by art'. Facts and objects, he would further argue, have meaning and significance in art not when they are in discord, not through their respective peculiarities, but through the personality of the artist, which is harmony. In Tagore's conception, ultimate reality is the person, and reality is but the expression of personality. To be transmuted in terms of art, facts and objects of the work-a-day world have to pass through the chemical metabolism of the person in man.

Tagore, therefore, admits the world of facts and objects but interprets them finally in terms of unity and harmony, and hence in terms of joy and beauty and bliss. He knows that the world exists independently of his sensuous experiences and of his imagination, but in his view of things facts and objects of this world have no absolute reality at all. They are real only in a relative sense; their essential truth dwells in the personality of the artist.

It follows, therefore, that Tagore's attitude to and awareness of the real world has hardly anything in common with what

is ordinarily understood by realism, but has strong and distinctive personal traits. There is nothing strange in this. The remoteness between object and its characteristic reaction in Tagore does not prove that he had no sense of object. He sees the world in a particular way, from the standpoint of the Creative Unity in Personality, before he reacts to it—emotionally, passionately—for it is integral to his conception of personality that the external world of objects 'become our own when it comes within the range of our emotions. With our love and hatred, pleasure and pain, fear and wonder, continually working upon it, this world becomes a part of our personality. It grows with our growth, it changes with our changes. We are great or small, according to the quality of its sum-total. If this world was taken away, our personality would lose all its content. . . . The principal creative forces, which transmute things into our living structure, are emotional forces.'

Behind Tagore's creativity, therefore, there are always roots in reality, however hidden and deep. Men and events and objects of this world do exist in his art, but they undergo a sea-change. They have had to pass through many states before they were admitted; the poet purifies them of their dross, paints them anew with his own colours, invests them with a significance which they never had before. This, one may say, was the most pronounced tendency of Tagore's artistic sensibility.

Tagore was, however, aware from the start that there was no direct, immediate connection between himself and the work-a-day world of facts and objects, and at times he felt it as a short-coming, a painful lack of fulness. Then he prays to his Muse to take him away from this world of subjective imagination to the world of objective facts. But the prayer is of no avail for many years; if at one moment he wants to turn back from the former, at another moment, and at a deeper level, he surrenders himself to it. Any conscious sense of 'reality', as ordinarily understood, enriched and heightened by mature experience, came much later, in the last phases of his life, and then his poems and songs at any rate, as also his dramas and essays, acquire a much greater richness, as we have seen in the course of our study. But even here his sense of 'reality' is not of the usual sort. All that he did was to accept the fact and the object and admit them into the process of his thought and imagination, and hence

into that of his individual becoming. It was indeed the final stage of his growth both as a person and as a poet; he grew by relating the fact and the object with his personality.

It was, roughly speaking, during this final phase of his life that Tagore came to stand face to face with what was considered to be the modern conception of reality as applied to literature and visual art. He entered into polemics on the subject in Bengali, and published a significant article in English on 'Modern Poetry'. He tried very sincerely to understand modern realism in literature and conceded that it must be the expression of an age torn by doubts and frustrations, self-tortured and twisted by what he calls 'aggressive disbelief and calumny towards the universe' and 'mental aberration'. He contended that this was an 'illusion, in which there was no serious attempt to accept reality in a calm and dispassionate frame of mind'. Paradoxically, it may seem to many, it was during this phase, however, that he became increasingly concerned with questions of pure form in literature and art. In literature, it took the form of new and bold experiments in metrics and prosody, of exploration and expansion of vocabulary, of crispness and condensation of expression, which were all 'modern' in the sense of the spirit of the age and which undoubtedly enriched immensely the works of his last years. In visual art, he got personally involved in the struggle between representational and non-representational art, and in hundreds of paintings and experiments with design of the period he seems to have come to recognise another aspect, but essentially the same, of the nature and character of reality as he had experienced throughout his life.

There is, then, no direct and immediate reflection of reality in Tagore's art. But, however indirect and remote and unfamiliar his sense of reality may seem to many, it certainly enriches the readers' sensibility, makes them, paradoxically though, more alive to the real world, more alive to its beauty, its rhythm and harmony, and deepens and extends the horizon of our *chetanā* or consciousness. We become the denizens, indeed, of a better and more beautiful world; we become better and freer men, more abundant in spirit, more creative in inspiration, imagination and intellect.

Forms of facts and objects belong to the world of the



finite which has its own value, argues Tagore, following the *Upanishad*, and he insists that 'for revealment of idea, form is absolutely necessary'. But form is always in a flux, he further argues in the same context; it is an unceasing flow, a succession of changing moments, fading into one another so quickly that we never see any one of them completely. As a poet and artist, it is one of his basic urges to recapture these fast-hurrying moments, suggest their place in the Creative Unity in Personality and communicate them to his reader, to his audience. In doing so, he has necessarily to add, subtract and alter much, but such additions, subtractions and alterations do not necessarily take away from the essential truth of the objects and events. There is nothing illogical in such a vision, it may be argued; indeed, there is much in it that gives new lustre to our awareness of reality. Here, too, Tagore came to articulate, in modern terms, the expressed and unexpressed reason and psyche of the traditional Indian vision and conception.

### 13. Essentials of Nature and Character

TAGORE was a poet, an artist, in all that he wrote and did. This is the one point I have been trying to emphasise. As an artist he was obliged to concern himself with such questions as form and formlessness, matter and form, etc.—at the beginning perhaps unconsciously, but later, more and more consciously and deliberately.

The teaching of his father, Devendranath, and his Upanishadic upbringing instilled into him, very early in life, the conception of formlessness of the Upanishadic Brahman, from whom the world of form is supposed to have originated. That all created objects were manifestations in form of One who was Himself formless, and that, consequently, whatever was *created* by man—music or poetry, for instance—had to be endowed with form in the same manner, was a conception that Tagore inherited from the Indian tradition. The questions of matter and spirit, of matter and form, of formlessness and form, of idea and image, etc. have been exhaustively discussed in the Upanishads. By the time the sages of the *Bṛihadāraṇyaka* had finished their deliberations on such problems, the basic postulate—namely, that form is created out of formlessness, and that formlessness and form or, in other words, the universal and the particular are but two aspects of one and the same thing—had come to be accepted by the Indian mind, and, with the passage of time, these were slowly woven into the texture of Indian thinking and imagination. It was this tradition which Tagore had inherited, and was nurtured and nourished in. Later in life, in his youth, he consciously started thinking about it and discovered, perhaps to his amazement, that it was echoed by our medieval poet-saints and saint-poets, notably by Dādu, and re-echoed by our common people in the midst of their day-to-day toils. Slowly but surely, the conception became, by the time he reached his early maturity, a part of his being and the very breath of his life.

It was during this stage of his life that he reinterpreted, in poetic form, an idea which was first given shape by Dādu:

Incense seeks to dissolve itself into fragrance and fragrance seeks to stay enveloped in incense.

Melody seeks to entwine itself with rhythm, and rhythm seeks to go back to melody;

Idea wants to embody itself into image, and image seeks to release itself into idea;

The infinite seeks intimate union with the finite, and the finite wants to dissolve itself in the infinite.

I know not whose logic it is in the work of creation and destruction, That there should be an unceasing coming and going between idea and image, between form and the formlessness.

That bondage to form should ever be seeking the freedom of the formless, and freedom begging for the nest of bondage.<sup>1</sup>

From then on his whole life is but a conscious and creative attempt to grasp the formless within the bounds of form, the infinite in the finite, the universal in the particular, and, in converse process, to reach the formless, the infinite and the universal through its diverse manifestations in countless forms. Indeed, this becomes a most favourite play of his—the Sanskrit and Bengali term *līlā* is much more significant in this context—this *līlā* between the formless and the form, the infinite and the finite, the universal and the particular. It is now the central note of his poetry and songs, his essays and sermons, his short stories and dramas, and in his day-to-day life too, so that his creative life and his life of actualities sing a harmonious tune, right till the last day of his life.

But to say that Tagore sought to concretise the formless in the frame of form, loving and adoring the latter as the manifestation of the formless itself, and then, in a converse movement, to realise and experience the formless through the form itself, is perhaps an over-simplification of the whole play or *līlā*. There is a powerful dialectic ever at work in Tagore's sensibility. His imagination, as we have said, is personal, introspective and spiritual, and to such an imagination every form is bound to appear as a limitation which cramps its freedom. Such an imagination, in other words, can never accept the limitations caused by a world of forms as in any sense final. It cannot but, after a time, chafe at them and try to escape to a region where such limitations do not exist. Continu-

<sup>1</sup> Rough rendering by the author.



ously, therefore, he is rebelling against the visible world, trying to find a sphere where visible forms do not exist to limit his imagination. But this movement soon produces another contradiction, which forces him to return to that world of forms which he previously denied; for, how can his imagination crystallise and find expression unless by and through the agency of visible forms? The poet is himself aware of the dualism in himself; in his deepest prayers he longs for the bondage of form and for a liberation from it. It is this dialectic that imparts charm to the *lilā* we have spoken of, and the poems and songs are insinuated by the spirit of this *lilā*.

The formless, the infinite, the universal are no abstract conceptions with the poet; indeed it could hardly be so with poets and artists whose creative faculties can operate only through form. In his early years this formless, infinite and universal conception takes the physical shape and form of his Ideal Woman, the *Mānasī*; at a slightly later stage, she is his *Mānas-sundarī*, the Ideal Beauty—call it his Muse of Poetry, if you like—but still she has the shape and form of a mysterious woman. In the next stage, this mysterious woman transforms herself into an exacting male god, the poet's *Jivan-devatā*, or life's Deity, and the poet is his lover, his helpless victim. Almost simultaneously, the Deity of his personal life becomes at times equated with *Deśa-devatā*, or the Deity of his country, *Viśva-devatā*, or the Deity of the world. At the final stage, this Deity is transformed into what the poet calls the Supreme Person. Yet, all the time, the attributes of formlessness, universality and infiniteness, and, shall I say, also of a sort of sweet mysteriousness, persists. Whatever name the poet calls Him by and in whichever shape and form he conceives, visualises and concretises Him in different stages of his life, this Supreme Person is the guide that leads him through life and stands guard at his door-step.

The idea of this Supreme Person, formless, universal and infinite, has nothing to do with God of theological definition, or of any institutional religion. Indeed Tagore's God is not metaphysical in any sense, but is capable of intuitive apprehension by any sensitive nature. Very much in the tradition of the Upanishadic seers, the Sufi mystics, our medieval poet-prophets or prophet-poets, and our folk poetry and music, as he contemplates the world of diverse finite forms, Tagore's sensitive mind posits

the existence of a higher, formless and infinite being who manifests himself in these, and gives them their life and motion. This formless and infinite being is, therefore, not an esoteric divination but an organic, intuitive realisation, in which the sensuous perception of the world culminates. Tagore's art contains the joy and variety, the light and colours and sounds, the emotions and passions and desires, in their whole tangible and sensuous naturalism, of the finite world of reality. Indeed, it is only through impregnating and inseminating himself with the highest and finest possible sensuous experiences that the poet at last reaches the sphere which is formless, infinite and above-sense. Since the formless and the infinite has no existence apart from its many forms, to deny the reality of the latter would be a denial of the formless also.

## 2

I have just referred to Tagore's almost instinctive and intuitive divination and recognition, not acceptance, it should be pointed out, of the Supreme Person, who endows man with powers and potentialities that are not measurable or demonstrable or experimentable. At a later stage in his life, he came to equate this Supreme Person with God,<sup>1</sup> perhaps for no other reason than the absence of another suitably and adequately perceptible or understandable term. I have already stressed that this Supreme Person has no metaphysical connotation of any institutional religion, simply because He does not rest upon any systematically argued and established philosophy or on any organised set of beliefs and rituals. Tagore, therefore, came to describe his religious and spiritual faith, and this he did in his mature years, as the religion of a poet. Therefore, even though he was a 'believer' in the accepted sense of the term, and also he never ceased to pray, a partly evolved habit, he was, as a poet should be, a 'free' man altogether, since he believed in and prac-

<sup>1</sup> In his adolescence and early youth he had accepted the traditional absolute Brahman of the Upanishads and of the Brahmo Samaj, wrote songs on Him for his father and even composed sermons. But this Brahman-God must not be confused with the Supreme Person-God he came to evolve through his personal experiences, through the inner drama of his life.

tised utmost freedom in the exercise of his reason, his will, his psyche and his senses and sensibilities for experiencing life in its infinite form and colour. The obvious aim was to cultivate his personal self. Whatever limitations one notices in his freedom were limitations imposed by himself dictated by his world view of things and by his aesthetic creed.

His religion, therefore, did not exclude his art, nor did it exclude his personal experience in relation to the world of men and things, or for that matter, the experiences of others of the past and the present. Indeed, the older and maturer he grew, the more he came to value the testimony of the experiences of genuinely religious persons of history. At the same time he pleaded, in essay after essay, for a better understanding of the implications of this precious testimony in the interest of the world peace and harmony, of more sanity in dealing with the affairs of humanity.

I have already hinted how, with Tagore, the idea of the formless, the infinite and the universal, the idea of the Supreme Person, of God evolved slowly but surely, and how it kept him company in one form or another, sometimes as the ideal woman or the ideal beauty or the muse of poetry, sometimes as the *antaryāmi*, 'the indwelling one', or the *antarātmā*, the 'innermost one', and, later in life, sometimes as the Supreme Person, and sometimes as God. At one time it is a 'she', at another, 'he', but, woman or man, that being is his closest friend, his most intimate beloved or lover, the one guardian of his soul, the one master of his destiny, in accordance with the relevant context of the poetic situation. One may question or even discard the metaphysical or theological validity of such a conception, but who will deny that such an intimate personal relationship as the one provided by it was pregnant with poetry, which Tagore exploited to the full? Indeed it yielded for him the richest harvest of his life.

A little while ago, speaking of the formless and the form, I referred to a converse movement by which Tagore sought to experience and realise the formless through the myriad forms created by him and by others. The formless trying to realise itself in form and the form seeking to dissolve or release itself in the formless was what, according to Tagore, constituted the relationship of the two.



This idea finds its inevitable echo in the poet's relation with his God. True, that God is his beloved, his friend, his guide, his master, all in one and one in all, and it is him that the poet seeks. But, at the same time, God also seeks him equally, and with the same intensity of desire and nostalgia; He also waits for him as does the poet, and without the latter's love God remains unfulfilled. Such was the mutual play or *lilā* of love between the two that, as expressed in the early poems with even erotic and in the later ones with sensuous images and suggestiveness, a poem or a song may be taken to have been addressed to the poet's God as much as to his beloved.

## 3

What was Tagore's attitude towards suffering and death?

Here, too, perhaps very naturally, the Upanishads and whatever he imbibed from them and from the life and teachings of his father, stood by him. Suffering and death were but the wiles and guiles of nature and God; they were indeed the fires of penance that one must learn to accept and pass through to enable one to achieve the disciplined poise which alone can invest life with that balance, harmony and peace that lie in the heart of the universe. In the early hours of the morning of July 30, before he was taken to the operation table, a week before his passing away on August 7, 1941, he dictated a poem which was destined to be his last:

You have covered the path of your creation  
in a mesh of varied wiles,  
guileful one.  
Deftly you have set a snare of false beliefs  
in artless lives.  
With your deception  
you have set the great man on trial  
taking from him the secrecy of night.  
Your star lights for him  
the translucent path of his heart,  
illuminated by a simple faith.  
Though tortuous outside  
is straight within.

and there is his pride.  
Though men call him futile,  
in the depth of his heart he finds truth  
washed clear by the inner light.  
Nothing can deprive him;  
he carries to his treasure house  
his last reward.  
He who could easily bear your wile,  
receives from you the right  
to everlasting peace.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, he did bear easily all pains and sufferings of death, the wiles and guiles of the Guileful One, who was none other than his God. If the above poem was his last testament on the subject, and it is clear and unequivocal, let us see for once how it began.

When my mother died I was quite a child.... On the night she died we were asleep, in our room, downstairs.... When in the morning we were told of her death, I could not realise all that it meant for me. As we went to the verandah we saw my mother laid on a bedstead in the courtyard; there was nothing in her appearance which showed death to be terrible. The aspect which death wore in that morning light was as lovely as a calm and peaceful sleep, and the gulf between life and its absence was not evident to us.

Only when her body was taken out by the main gateway and we followed the procession to the cremation ground, did a storm of grief pass through me.... As the day wore on and we returned from the cremation, we turned into our lane and I looked up towards my father's room on the third floor. He was still in the front verandah sitting motionless in prayer.

This 'sitting motionless in prayer' came to be Tagore's settled reaction and attitude towards suffering and death. His mother's death was just the beginning of a series of deaths that he had to face, one after another, all through his long life. Kadambari Devi, wife of Jyotirindranath Tagore, one of his elder brothers, committed suicide in 1884. The poet was greatly attached to her and her memory haunted him all his life. He lost his home-

<sup>1</sup> Translation by Amiya Chakravarty.

ly wife, Mrinalini Devi, when he was in his early forties, and three of their children died before they were grown up. His only grandson, of whom he was very fond, also died when he was a mere boy. He bore all these losses, and many others of his dearest friends and colleagues, in an attitude of prayer, with equanimity and quiet dignity, in a self-created atmosphere of peace and harmony. I will here cite two incidents which will reveal the pattern of his discipline in this respect. The first incident we know from his son, Rathindranath Tagore, who died in 1961, and the other happened in my presence. The poet's youngest son, Shami, a frail but lovely boy, had died at Monghyr. The poet was returning to Bolpur after seeing him there for the last time. At a wayside station his friends, altogether ignorant of the tragedy, brought him food and delicacies prepared especially for him. Tagore accepted the food, conversed with them as usual, and left them as the train steamed off without so much as even hinting at what had happened! The other incident is in respect of the death of his grandson, Nitindra, in Switzerland in the year 1926. We had all known that Nitu had been lying ill in hospital, but lately the poet had heard from Andrews, who had been keeping in touch with the hospital, that Nitu was showing signs of improvement and we knew about it too. Late one morning I went to see him in his room on the second floor of their family house at Jorasanko, Calcutta. I spent more than half an hour with him listening to him talk on the controversy that was then raging around contemporary Bengali literature. Before leaving him I took, as we always did, the dust of his feet, and came down straight to the ground floor exit, when Vanamali, the old and loyal servant of the poet, came near and whispered into my ears: 'Nitu is no more; Andrews Sahib's telegram reached us yesterday.' I was stunned as much by the sad news as by the poet's calm and repose. Such calm and repose, such poise and dignity in the face of acute suffering and death—were they quite human? Yet this was perfectly in keeping with his personality that he had built up through long culture, from his very early years.

In connection with his family and the *āśrama* at Santiniketan, he faced constant financial difficulties. In literary and public life, he experienced many frustrations and disillusionments. His was a sensitive nature, and all this must have been particularly



distressing to him, but there was another side of his nature and personality which accepted every situation, however vexing, with utmost tranquillity. Indeed, he had always been, not merely in his old age, an image of repose and tranquillity. The Jallian-walabagh massacre at Amritsar, in 1919, shook him to his roots. For one whole night he could not sleep and walked up and down the long verandah of the Jorasanko house, but then he sat down to pray, after which he produced that piece of literature of intense human agony and peace—his letter to the Viceroy renouncing his knighthood. He suffered deeply the sufferings of his country and his people and of the world, but he never allowed anything to disturb the peace, the unity and the harmony of his inner self, nor did he allow them to cast their shadows on his creative work.

His nature and personality were amazingly disciplined! He may, at times, have been momentarily disturbed by the restlessness that sometimes invades a sensitive and creative mind; again he may, at times, have been disturbed by the incessant, and often cruel, demands that are made on a writer, a poet and a public man of his stature and eminence; his personal bereavements, failures, frustrations, the burden of honours, praises, and prizes of the contemporary world may also have disturbed him sometimes. But all these do not appear to have in any way shaken the placidity and the peace of his mind; they did not change the dignified pattern of his life, they did not undermine his faith in the principles of harmony and balance, of poise and peace that, he believed, sustained the world.

## 4

Tagore refused to grow old. His mind never ossified; it retained, to the very end, its power of lithe absorption and assimilation. His art is therefore as rich and as endlessly varied as nature itself. It explores so many spheres of consciousness and experience, and does not appear to be confined within any limits. Some feeling, some thought, some revelation or realisation or idea may have dominated him, may have permeated every fibre of his being for some time, but only

for some time, for after some time the poet would chafe under such domination and would struggle himself free from it. While such domination lasted and was not felt as an enslavement, it inspired songs and poems, short stories and plays of immortal beauty; but Tagore would not be a poet of such great significance if he allowed his development to come to an end at any particular phase. 'Phase' is perhaps the right word because if there was any poet whose work evolved in phases, each more significant than the preceding one, that poet was Rabindranath Tagore, who sang in thankfulness: 'Thou hast made me endless, such is thy pleasure. This frail vessel thou emptiest again and again, and fillest it ever with fresh life.'

I have already said that Tagore's poetry is inseparable from his life. 'Day follows day in measured and everlasting succession, but I know no rest. I run day and night without pause', he says of his spirit in one of his poems. And is not this true of his poetry too? It too is as restless as his spirit, never stays long in any mood or attitude, but is ever flitting from one sensation to another. Yet, withal, deep down his self he seems to maintain the peace and quietude, the expansive and dignified repose of the depths of the ocean.

The poet was aware that there was no destination for him, no stability, and this awareness disturbed him. As he was composing *Mānasī*, an early volume of poems, he wrote to a young friend in a mood of deep disquiet: 'The poetry I write now is so different from music and painting that I feel it does not progress at all in any definite direction; it is all flux and change. I feel I am on the verge of another change and wonder when at last I shall settle down in my proper place, the place destined for me. This change and nothing but change frightens me, for it makes me fear that nothing of what I have written so far will live—they are only tentative utterances and I have not found my own voice yet.' Although the poet was wrong to give way to this despondency, he never found that stability for which he yearned, and the disturbing feeling of crisis and continual change he speaks of in this letter was to be recurrent throughout his life. But one should not regret this. What better consummation could there be than this ceaseless urge for change, which never lets him rest but drives him forward to explore and absorb ever

new areas of life? Yet, we must remember at the same time that all his crises, his ceaseless craving for change, are subjective in character, begotten by the spirit.

## 5

I have already pointed out how, up to the very end of his life, Tagore drank deeply in the perennial flow of the Upanishads, and how powerfully he was influenced, throughout, by our medieval heritage, that is, by the folk religious literature, songs and music of the mystics of our country, particularly of the Āuls, Bāuls, Sahajiyās, Dādupanthis, Kavīrpanthis and the like, on the one hand, and by the Vaishnava philosophy and literature of Bengal, on the other. These provided in the main what may be called the collective reservoir of ideas, images, symbols, feelings, thoughts, etc. upon which the poet drew continuously. This is the basic creative soil, the collective consciousness, of the Indian people. Again and again, especially at every period of crisis, the poet referred back to this fountain-head, plunged and dipped into it, swam across it, and came back refreshed, rejuvenated and reconfirmed. Even in ordinary times he never lost contact with it; indeed, his intimacy with the collective psyche of the Indian people was always very close, much closer than any of his predecessors from Rammohan onwards, closer than any of his contemporaries, older or younger. Not for a moment did he forget that he arose out of the soil and that he had his roots in it. And, in this he only followed the natural process, indeed the historical laws of all great art and culture, of all systematic disciplines of knowledge. This natural process is inherent in the process of his growth, which is a recurrent theme of his poetry and as much of his poetry as of his personal life.

Into this basic stream of medieval heritage was also joined our heritage of ancient and classical Sanskrit literature, represented by the Vedas (the *Rik* and the *Atharva*) and Kālidāsa in particular. From this was derived that element of his mind and nature that was pagan. The autochthonous paganism of Bengali rural life and the romantic paganism of the English



romantic poets, especially of Shelley, of whom he was a great admirer, only helped to fortify this strain. His basic attitude towards nature, his ideology in respect of the fundamental relationship between nature and man, and a large portion of his ideas and images, symbols and meanings, feelings and thoughts are derived from this pagan outlook on life. Much of the richness of his poetry, as of his life, he owed to his worship of 'false' gods—the phenomena of nature, of human, animal and plant life.

## 6

Paradoxical but nevertheless true is the fact that a deep-seated rationalism went side by side with this paganism, a kind of rationalism that had nothing to do with questions of systematic logic. This rationalism he derived from the spirit and atmosphere of the times—from western education and science that were shaking the intellectual foundations of contemporary India, but equally from the protestant and non-conformist strains and trends of Indian religion and philosophy, Buddhism, for example, which lay more stress on peace, progress, and freedom as understood on the human plane; and from the rationalist and protestant strand of Bengali culture initiated by Rammohan, fostered by the poet's father Devendranath Tagore, and reared up by such nineteenth-century intellectuals as Isvarchandra Vidyasagar. Tagore's uncompromising stand against narrowness and bigotry, against social, economic and political exploitations of any kind, against national prides and prejudices, caste and class exclusiveness, in short, against anything that lessen human freedom, understood in its deepest and widest sense, that is, his humanism, was informed to a great extent by this rationalist attitude.

Yet, it must be recognised that, although he kept himself in touch with the discoveries and applications of modern science and was full of admiration for the unending quest of the human spirit that lay behind such discoveries, although he used some of the findings and conclusions of modern science in his poetry and in his essays and sermons, he had, at the same time, an old-world suspicion of the scientific or

the so-called objective method. The poet made no secret of it; time and again he spoke of the inadequacy of the objective method in 'getting at' the truth, since truth lay not in knowing but in realising the deeper experience of life. Hence the inadequacy of ratiocination, which, from his point of view, is just another word for cerebration and nothing more. Man, Tagore seems to argue, does not live by the brain alone.

## 7

What I have just said would help us to understand why Tagore laid so much stress on *prāṇa*, the vital life force. *Prāṇa*, and not *mana*, which is intellect, is the seat of creation; the function of *mana*, which is the sixth sense, is to analyse, examine, classify, arrange, and put into order what issues out of or is put forth by the vital life force, that is, *prāṇa*. The Upanishads set forth very clearly the various levels of our existence; and there too the creative level is called the level of *prāṇa*. Indeed, one of the short passages from the Upanishads which Tagore was never tired of repeating is: *Yat kincha yadidam sarvam prāṇa ejaṭi nihśritam* (All that there is comes out of life and vibrates in it). The poet's basic faith was in this vital life force, and hence in the spontaneity of feeling, emotion and passion, or, in other words, in the purity of the creative urge. Not that he discarded or paid scant regard to reason which is the function of the intellect. Rather he emphasised the need of discipline, even of rigorous discipline and self-control—his personal life was a shining example of such control and discipline—but the urge of the vital life force, the poet would maintain, must not be prevented from making itself felt through all the controls and disciplines; rather these should help the vital urge to express itself more strongly. The prolixity and extravagance of expression, the superabundant expansiveness of a number of his poems, which sometime lower their total effect, especially in his earlier works, are due, to an extent, to the superabundance of the vitality of *prāṇa*. At the same time, the enormous quantity of his creative output, the easy flow of language, ideas, images, similes, metaphors, etc., as well as the amazing versatility of

his genius, both of which have the character of tropical plentitude, are also directly attributable to the vigour and vitality of his *prāṇa*. Also, the measure of the purity and spontaneity of his creative urge is the measure of the sincerity and integrity of his poetic expression. *Prāṇa* is, indeed, an ever recurrent theme in his poems, sermons and essays.

It is only natural that a believer in *prāṇa* would reject *vairāgya* (non-attachment, asceticism) of any kind, Buddhistic or Vedantic or Christian, as the central theme of life. And this is what Tagore did, all through his life. The first assertion of this rejection made itself already felt in *Kādī O Kamal* (Sharps and Flats), and since then he dedicated himself to the fullest acceptance of life and nature. An artist's world is the world of 'name' (*nāma*) and 'form' (*rūpa*), with its pains, pangs and sufferings, with its beauties, joys and bliss; and he accepted them all. His goal may have been, as indeed it was, the absolute freedom of the nameless and the formless, but he sought this freedom not away from the world of 'name' and 'form' but inside the very heart of it. Indeed, he was always an unsparing critic of any kind of negation of life on the sensuous plane. Or else he would not have been a poet, an artist, far less an artist in life. Indeed Tagore loved most deeply this visible world of 'name' and 'form'—its countless manifestations in man and nature. In his later years, when he felt his days were drawing close, his attachment to this world of 'name' and 'form' grew even deeper, and the thought of having to take leave of it was to him an agony. With this his attitude to this world became full of humble thankfulness for affording him all the joys and experiences that he got out of this life, as well as for making it possible for him to know the formless in infinite forms.

When I go from hence let this be my parting word, that what I have seen is unsurpassable.

I have tasted of the hidden honey of this lotus that expands on the ocean of light, and thus I am blessed—let this be my parting word.

In this play-house of infinite forms I have had my play and here have I caught sight of Him that is formless.

My whole body and my limbs have thrilled with His touch



who is beyond touch; and if the end comes here, let it come—let this be my parting word.

Yet, at the same time, in the midst of all this attachment to the world of name and form, his inner being maintained a certain kind of perfect detachment. I have already said how, aloof and withdrawn, he could be in the midst of company, with what detachment he could face physical suffering and mental anguish or death. He could even keep himself away, in a way, from his own passions and attachments. If detachment with him was the freedom of the universal he sought for, attachment to the forms of life and nature was the bondage of the particular he was athirst for. It was a sort of discipline he had been cultivating, consciously and deliberately, since his early life until it became a part of his being, and as easy with him as breathing. There is indeed a powerful dialectic at work in all this, and he only half knows Tagore and the Indian tradition who has not the sensitivity to understand this dialectic. Mere knowledge of the rationality of Upanishadic philosophy or of the Vedantic would hardly explain the mystery of this *filā*—the constant swing of the human spirit between two apparent opposites, the finite and the infinite, the universal and the particular, formlessness and form, detachment and attachment, *bhoga* and *vairāgya*, freedom and bondage, and so on.

## 8

I have just spoken of his deep love for, and attachment to, things of human life and nature. Yet, at the same time, it has to be recognised that in the enormous corpus of his works, as in the story of his long life, there is hardly any evidence of what one knows as grand passion. No boiling blood and tense muscles, no quickened nerves ever disturbed, to any great extent, the even flow and tenor of his feelings and emotions. He bore everything, even the deepest suffering and resentment and hatred, or the most intense joy and pleasure, with a quiet dignity, a sort of intellectual detachment born of a deeper understanding of the inner laws of nature.

The world of the senses and of the mind was not rejected thereby, but was experienced and realised on a higher and sublimated level of consciousness. To understand this in a Platonic sense or in that of the romanticists of the nineteenth century will be to miss the point altogether. It has to be admitted that Tagore's attitude in this respect was basically conditioned by his world view of things, by the laws of creative unity, in which unity and harmony play an important role. Expressions of violent passion belong to the moment; they are 'accidents' or 'faults', though they are not unreal. As such they too reveal, in part though, the nature of things. But viewed in the larger context and perspective of life and love or hatred or anger, they merge in the even, organic, total flow and tenor of life. It is this total organic life that Tagore sought to unfold.

## 14. The Poet's Vision of Indian History

THERE is a school of historical thinkers that stresses the importance of approaching and studying the history of a people with view to discovering and understanding what may be called its character and genius, its native strength and weaknesses, its promises and potentialities. Not that the character and qualities of a people do not change. They do, for they are to a very considerable degree determined by various forces, such as social, political, economic, religious, ideological etc., which themselves are everchanging; and, as these forces change, the nature and character of the people also, more or less, change, gradually. But, however profound the changes that a people or a society may undergo, many of its significant traits of character, the fundamental stuff of its nature remain discernible through all such changes.

And one of the most important functions of history, according to this school, is to reveal and study these fundamental qualities and values that constitute the character and genius of a people. Without an awareness of all this, we can never have the vision which enables us to see which among the many current trends and tendencies are in keeping with the deeper and more fundamental character and genius of the people and should, therefore, be fostered and encouraged, and which, not being so, discouraged and restrained.

Tagore would seem to have had a conception of the function and importance of history similar to that held by this school of thinkers; and it was from that angle that he appears to have approached, studied and interpreted the history of India. An analysis, therefore, of his approach to, and of his vision of, Indian history is likely to provide us a clue to a deeper understanding of his personality.

In a poem written when he was about forty, Tagore reveals ideas which clearly visualize history as a moving, life-generating, entity that shapes and forms the character of a people.



Tumultuous years bring their voice to your bosom  
Unfathomed past:  
In what dark silence do you keep it gathered, covering it  
under your brooding wings?  
You move in secret like midnight hours realising dreams;  
Often have I felt your muffled steps in my blood,  
have seen your hushed countenance in the heart  
of the garrulous day.  
You come to write stories of our fathers in unseen scripts  
on the pages of our destiny;  
You lead back to life the unremembered  
for the shaping of new images.  
Is not the restless present itself your own visions  
flung up like planets that arise  
from the bottom of the dead night?<sup>1</sup>

## 2

One way of measuring the greatness of a man, as of measuring the importance of his creative thought and action, is to measure the degree of his success in bringing about an integration of, and a synthesis between, his inherited tradition and the challenge of his times. In measuring this success one must consider how he interprets this tradition and the manner and method he suggests, and himself adopts, to revitalise it to flow towards the future. Judging a man's action and thought from this angle is particularly important in those periods of history of a people when it seeks to decide the direction of its development and growth, to know its historical destiny.

The nineteenth century and the first quarter of the twentieth was such a period in Indian history. And during this period we find a continuous succession of leading Indian thinkers and men of action seeking to lay down the main lines of what we call our contemporary national culture and ideology. This quest started with Raja Rammohan Roy who seems to have been most successful after a long period of stress and strain, clashes and conflicts, in creating a national ideology that was inherently capable of continuous expansion in area, depth and significance.

<sup>1</sup> The Introductory poem in *Kathā* (Ballads, 1900).

Each of these thinkers and men of action who devoted themselves to this quest for a national ideology examined carefully, according to his own lights, the tradition and history of India. This examination of the past was very necessary in order to determine what portion of it could be profitably affiliated to and integrated with the ideology which was held up for the nation to follow, along which the nation was to advance in future. How necessary this is is best exemplified in Jawaharlal Nehru. A product of Harrow and Cambridge, he imbibed the best intellectual tradition of the contemporary West; but he had to discover India, even at a relatively late age, so that he might affiliate himself with the history and tradition of his people, and thus acquire the vision and the authority to be able to lead the nation along the right path.

And what was Rabindranath Tagore's way of examining the tradition and history of his people? Assiduous study of the historical writings, available to him, on Indian and other ancient, medieval and modern civilizations, close study and observation of the traditional life around him, and constant contemplation of the facts and ideas that constitute the story of the Indian people through the ages. Tagore was a voracious reader all his life and quite a few books on various aspects of Indian history and culture and on general historiography are still preserved in the library of Visva-Bharati University, which show how carefully he studied them. Some of these volumes he used have their margins covered with his notes and comments. He was not in the habit of furnishing footnotes or of citing references in his published writings, presumably because he was not a professional scholar. But a close study of his writings reveals the sources of his facts and ideas. A list of books on the social sciences, including history that he read from time to time, would be a long one, and this would include almost all the important titles of contemporary writings on the history, culture and sociology of India, and also the works of such Western authors as Hegel and Spengler, Frazer and Sorokin, Westernmarck and Keyserling, Guizot and Seely, and others.

We have a number of his short essays and articles on Indian history and many of these written in his formative years and years of early maturity. But his incidental incursions into history

continued throughout his life and a good many of his socio-political, educational and cultural essays are instinct with a vision generated by his interpretation of the different aspects and phases of Indian history and culture, seen in the context of world history and culture. Africa had by the turn of our century awakened his interest, which he retained till the end of his life. When he was about seventy he had enough energy and interest to go through the voluminous *Survey of Africa* by Hailey, and he transmuted his responses and reactions into a magnificent poem on what we call today the African personality.

But much more significant than these writings, in which he analyses and interprets, directly or indirectly, Indian history and culture, is his unceasing awareness of India's past, from the days of the Vedas and the Upanishads right up to his own, that pervades his being and his entire creative works. Formally and spiritually he aimed at an interpretation and complete identification of his individual personality with the personality of India as he saw and understood it.

## 3

From his early writings it would appear that, when Tagore was only sixteen, he had already interested himself in India's not very distant past (he published his first historical essay, *Jhānsī Rānī*, Queen of Jhānsī, in 1877), and by the time he was twenty-five he had developed a keen interest not only in Indian history but also in world history. But it was during the last decade of the nineteenth and the first of the twentieth, when he was in his thirties and forties, that he had developed what we may call a strong historical consciousness and wrote and published a long series of essays and criticisms in interpretation of Indian history and culture. By the year 1912, the year that saw the publication of his *Bhāratvarsher Itihāser Dhātā* (A Vision of India's History)—he was fifty at that time—he had already studied and expressed himself on the following topics and problems of Indian history and culture: the early home of the Aryans, the clashes and conflicts in the process of continuous integration of the Aryans, the pre-Aryans



and the non-Aryans; the clashes and conflicts between Saivism and Vaishnavism and the cross-fertilisation of both; the nature and character of what is known as Hinduism; the maladjustments of the Indian people's intellectual and spiritual aims and aspirations with the behaviour pattern in Indian civilisation; social revolutions as symbolised in the *Mahābhārata*; the transformation of a food-gathering to a food-producing economy as symbolised in the *Rāmāyaṇa*; the devastating inhumanity of the caste system and yet the social and economic security it afforded to the people; the ethnological composition of the Indian people and the psychological factor in their history; the ideal position of the *Brāhmaṇas* in Hindu society; the nature and significance of the *āśrama* life and of the Hindu marriage system; the character of Śrī Kṛṣṇa of the *Mahābhārata*; the Indian classical ideal as expressed in classical Sanskrit literature; the significance of fairs and festivals in Indian social life; Aśoka and his times; the role of the Buddha and Buddhism in Indian history; the character of the history of the Mughals; the nature and character and history of the Marathas, the Rajputs and the Sikhs and Sikh *gurus*; the nature and character of the history of disintegration of Indian social polity in the eighteenth century and of the feudal princely states; comparative analysis of oriental and occidental civilisations. And by no means is this an exhaustive list of the historical topics he had written on. During this period, he also translated a considerable portion of so important a Buddhist text as the *Dhammapada* and wrote studies on it; also he studied Kabīr, a leading exponent of our medieval mysticism, and published translations of his poems in English.

The relevant writings of Tagore during these two decades fall roughly into five different categories. First, there is a series of notes, essays and criticisms that are directly historical in character and cover, more or less, the whole gamut of India's past, beginning from the Indo-Aryans and ending with the nineteenth century.

Secondly, there is a short series which includes essays and criticisms like *Prācīya O Prācīhya* (the Orient and the Occident, 1891), *Prācīya O Pāścātya Saṁbhātā* (Eastern and Western Civilisation, 1901), *Brāhmaṇa* (1901), *Samājband*

(Social Divisions, 1901), *Nūtan O Purātan* (The New and the Old, 1891), *Kṛishṇacharit* (The Personality of Kṛishṇa, 1894), etc., which may be called quasi-historical, since in all such writings what he tries to do is to build up his theme on an evaluation of the relevant historical tradition.

Thirdly, there is another long series of essays (all written and published during the two decades referred to above) that are frankly socio-political, but are instinct with a vision that he had acquired from his study and interpretation of certain historical facts and ideas. Such are the notes and essays on *Ingrāj O Bhāratvāsī* (The English and the Indians, 1893), *Rammohan Roy*, *Mukhujje banām Bādūjje* (Mukherjee verses Banerjee, 1898), *Rājñitir Dvidhā* (Hesitancy in Politics, 1893), *Apamāner Pratikār* (Antidote to Insult, 1893), *Saphalatār Sadupāy* (Right Way to Success, 1904), *Deśiya Rājya* (Princely States, 1905), *Seadeśi Samāj* (National Society, 1904), *Rājbhakti* (Loyalty to the King, 1905), *Bahurōjakatā* (1905), *Presidential Address at the Provincial Conference at Patna* (1907), *Path O Pātheya* (The Way and the Fare), *Samasyā* (The Problems, 1906), etc.

Fourthly, there is a still longer series that starts from the eighties of the last century, when Tagore was in his twenties; here we have essays, sermons, notes, etc. which are all, more or less, exclusively devoted to the study, analysis and interpretation of our undying Upanishadic lore, which was one of his personal sources of inspiration, of our two great epics, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, of our classical Sanskrit literature, of our heritage of Bengali Vaishṇava and other literatures of northern India, mainly of the medieval mystics, and of the great submerged literary treasure of the rural folks of Bengal. It may be pointed out in this connection that his deep interest in the Upanishads and in the Bengali Vaishṇava literature started very early in his life. His Upanishadic lineage is much too well known and does not call for any elaboration. His *Bhānusīmha Thākurer Padāvalī* (The Lyrics of Bhānusīmha Thākur, 1884) shows his early affiliation to the Vaishṇava literary tradition. But what is perhaps not so well known is that his first prose writings on Vidyāpati and Chandidās are datable in 1818, that he helped Srischandra Majumdar in his compilation and editing of the *Padaratnāvalī*

(1885), that for about ten years he was engaged in preparing an edition of the *Padāvalis* of Vidyāpati, the complete manuscript of which was handed over to Kaliprasanna Kavyavisārad, but which unfortunately never saw the light of day. It is also not well known that his first essay on our folk lore and literature, *Bāuler Gān* (the Songs of the Bāuls), was published in 1893, the year in which he also gave a public call for the collection of our folk-songs and ballads and that a year later he wrote and published essays on Bengali folk nursery and feminine rhyme (*Chhelebhulāno Chhādā* and *Meyeli Chhādā*).

Fifthly, and finally, there is a series of creative writings in the form of lyrics and narrative poems and dramas and at least one novel, *Gorā* (1908), which were inspired by and saturated with the poet's vision and interpretation of the cultural and ideological pattern of Indian history and tradition. Among such lyrics and narrative poems are a few like *Gurugovinda* in *Mānaś* (The Lady of the Mind), quite a number in *Sonār Tarī* (The Golden Boat, 1894), *Chitrā* (The Multi-Coloured, 1895), *Chaitālī* (The Last Harvest, 1896), *Kalpanā* (Dreams, 1900), but more emphatically a number of poems in *Kathā* (Ballads, 1900), *Kāhinī* (Tales, 1900), *Naivedya* (The Offering, 1901), and *Kheyā* (The Ferry, 1907), and at least two from *Gītāñjali* (The Song-Offering, 1910). The narrative poems and dramas in verse in *Kathā* and *Kāhinī*, it is well known, are based on Vedic, Epic and Buddhist legends and on episodes from the myths and history of the Sikhs, the Rajputs and the Marathas. One must not also forget that the majority of the poems in *Kalpanā* and *Naivedya* and two major poems in *Gītāñjali* are also imbued with and inspired by what, according to him, was best in the cultural and spiritual tradition of ancient and medieval India. To what extent he was inspired by the Upanishadic *āśrama* life and by the ancient Indian ideal and pattern of education is amply illustrated by *Brahmacharya Vidyālaya* (The Poet's School) which he established at Santiniketan in 1901, when he was forty. The narrative poems and dramas in verse and the two dramas, *Viśarjan* (1889-90) and *Mālinī* (1886), reveal very clearly which aspects and principles of the Indian tradition appealed to his



creative mind and which ones he wanted to uphold. This is equally true of the lyrics of *Kalpanā*, *Naivedya* and *Kheyā*.

I have, I am afraid, referred to a huge mass of material, but if one is to form an idea of what was Tagore's vision and interpretation of India's history and her cultural tradition, not one single item in this entire material can be ignored. And, to my mind, it is very significant that the poet's vision and interpretation were conceived, roughly speaking, during the last decade of the nineteenth and the first of the twentieth century—two decades of intense intellectual, social and political ferment in Bengal when nobody thought and expressed himself more deeply and actively, with more seriousness and sincerity of purpose than did Rabindranath Tagore. The main threads of our contemporary political and cultural nationalism were, by and large, spun during these two historic decades, and no one's contributions towards this end were more than the poet's. By 1911, when he was fifty and had already reached the meridian of his creative life, affiliation to and identification with what he considered to be the personality of Indian culture were almost all but complete.

It was as if to summarise and bring to the fore the results of his study and analysis of the facts of history and the ideas round which the web of Indian life and culture were woven through the centuries that he wrote, in 1912, a very significant essay, *Bhāratvarshe Itihāse Dhārā*, which Jadunath Sarkar, the doyen of Indian historians, considered so important that he published an English translation of it in *The Modern Review* (1913). Ten years later, another English rendering of this essay was published, this time by the poet himself, under the title, *A Vision of Indian History*. Years before, in 1902, he had already published an essay on *Bhāratvarsher Itihās* (History of India). These two essays lay down the main lines along which, he imagined, the history and culture of the people of India had flowed. Whatever he did by way of interpreting India's history and culture later in his long life went only to reinforce, expand and deepen the conclusions he had already reached and expressed in these two essays by the time he was fifty.

Before I proceed to summarise the main lines and conclusions I have just referred to, it is perhaps necessary to find out, from the speeches and writings of these two decades, what was Rabindranath's angle of approach to the study of history and culture of his people, in other words, what his ideas were on the historiography of India.

In the essay *Bhāratvarsher Itihās* he says:

The history of India that we read, cram and reproduce in our examination scripts is indeed a bad nightmare. A group of people comes from somewhere outside and there ensues a struggle unto death for power, a tug of war for the throne between a father and a son, and between brothers, and then, if one group passes out of the stage, another emerges from somewhere—the Pathanas and the Mughals, the Portuguese, the French, and the English have all combined to make this nightmare more and more complex.

But one does not know the history of India if one chooses to look at the country and its people through a changing dream-film coloured red by the blood of war and struggle. For such histories do not say anything about the people of India. As if they did not exist, and only those did who fought and quarrelled among themselves.

It is altogether unacceptable that even in those dark days of our history these struggles for power, these strifes and wars were the most important facts of history. Even in those stormy days the thundering roars of the wind and the clouds could not have been the most important facts of the day, since even in a day of such description, under the canopy of a dusty and clouded sky, the normal current of births and deaths, of misery and happiness flowed on, though, may be, in a somewhat disturbed manner.

That the history of every country should have the same pattern and objective, is a kind of superstition that must be given up. If an expert on the life of Rothschild engages himself with the task of writing a biography of Christ, he is likely to call for the records of accounts and office diaries of Christ, and if he does not find them, he may come to the conclusion that, since Christ was not worth a penny, his life is not worth writing about. Like that there are those who, intending to write the history of India,

look for her dynastic chronicles or records of victories and defeats in war in the archives of government and, when they do not get them, they are discouraged to attempt the task, since, they say, how can there be history without politics? Their argument is like that of those who look for egg-plants in a paddy field, and, being disappointed, conclude that paddy is a worthless crop. Wisdom lies in knowing that the product of every field cannot be the same, and that the right crop is to be expected only from the right field.<sup>1</sup>

In another essay, *Bhāratvarshe Itihāser Dhārā*, while discussing the role of Viśvāmitra, Janaka and Rāmachandra in early Indo-Aryan life and thought, he makes the significant remark that these three personalities may not be contemporaries from the point of view of chronological history, they may be even mythical, but, according to the poet, they were indeed contemporaries or near contemporaries from the ideological point of view, and this also has a deep historical significance.

In the same essay, speaking on the *Mahābhārata*, the poet argues that this epic may not be regarded as history according to the western definition of the discipline, but it was the real history of the Indo-Aryans, written or compiled not by an individual author but by an entire people speaking about themselves in their normal avocations of life. A scholar, if he aims at writing a factual and objective history out of the mass of myths, legends, traditions, etc. selected out of this great book, would never be able to reveal more truly and clearly the real history of those early days of Indo-Aryan society.

There is one more recurrent idea in all his historical and quasi-historical essays. He held that every people, in a given time and space, works out, consciously or unconsciously, a central theme of life, a basic ideology which is not always easily definable, though its perception by a sensitive mind is not difficult. It is, the poet argues, like *prāṇa* the vital organ of life, direct and ever present, yet, again, like *prāṇa*, it is difficult to define and apprehend intellectually. The main task of the historian is to grasp this vital and central element in a people's life. He also held, perhaps as a corollary, that

<sup>1</sup> Rough rendering by the author.



every country and its people, again consciously or unconsciously, seek through their history the solution of the basic human problems, the answer to fundamental challenges, and, in the process of doing so, come to establish and nourish a certain set of values. The duty of the historians is to study these problems, these challenges, these values, to trace their evolution, to discover their nature and character, to find out the people's responses and reactions to them.

It would now be clear that what we call dynastic or even political history had little fascination for Tagore. Indeed, he thoroughly discouraged the study of India's history and culture from a political angle. His own approach was almost uncompromisingly social and cultural. Again and again he argues that politics was never the central theme of life at any time of India's long past, that the political state was always a distant factor (*Delhi durast*, Delhi is far away) in the lives of the people of India; hence a mere political chronicler's approach would ever miss the essence of Indian life and culture. As an inevitable corollary, he had also a marked predilection for an ideological approach, since he came to hold that an individual's, and for that matter, a society's life is as much conditioned and determined by material considerations as by ideological. He had, therefore, scant regard for chronological niceties or for the mere externals of life.

Nor did he believe in looking at history as a series of accidents; rather, he held that there was always a unity, an unceasing undercurrent of cause and effect relationship, which was not always visible in the external events of life. This becomes clear, however, when we view history from the socio-cultural and ideological angle. It is for the historian, he argued, to discover that unity, that undercurrent which alone can bring out the direction in the history of a given time and space.

Methodologically, Tagore was somewhat sceptic about the the overall importance and trustworthiness of what is called state-documents and archives, written whether on stone or copper or paper, whether ancient or medieval or modern, since all these emanated from sources that were not always very impartial or even relevant to the purpose of an intimate understanding of the life of the people. It was the history of

the life and thought and social organisation of the people of India, it was the history of their aims and aspirations that, he considered, was important, and not the history of the kings and their dynasties, of the generals and their wars, of the nobles and their prides and pastimes, of the governors and the viceroys and their doings that was important.

Already in the nineties of the last century he had drawn the attention of his countrymen to the importance of collecting, publishing, and seriously studying the unwritten myths and legends, the folk songs and ballads, the feminine and nursery rhythms, the sayings and proverbs, and such other materials as emanated from our unlettered rural folks. He also saw the importance of studying our fairs and festivities, our places of worship and pilgrimage. For he considered that all these, besides their literary, aesthetic and cultural values, were just the right avenues through which one might hope to gain a true understanding of the life and history of our people. In 1894, not long after the foundation of the Bangiya Sāhitya Parishad (Bengali Academy of Letters) in Calcutta, he delivered an address to the students of Bengal, in which he impressed upon them the importance of such materials for historical purposes. Even for earlier periods, the study of the creative arts and literature, of the thoughts and ideas of the intellectual class as much as of the unlettered ordinary folk of those periods revealed, he thought, a more authentic picture of the past than was to be found through the study of what was professionally called documents.

From his writings of a little over the two decades I have referred to already, it is possible to trace a certain process of evolution of his ideas and interpretations on Indian history. It is well known that during the closing years of the nineteenth to the first ten to fifteen years of the twentieth century, our intellectual and cultural leaders tried hard to discover the history of their country's past, and thus to affiliate and identify themselves with what they considered to have been our national tradition and ideology. Through their creative writings, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyaya and Rajendralal Mitra were the first to satisfy, to an extent, such longing. And although both, specially Rajendralal Mitra, who was a friend of the Tagore family, inspired Tagore and roused his historical

curiosity, they could not satisfy his appetite. Later in his life, two professional historians, Akshaykumar Maitra and Jadunath Sarkar, the latter a junior by about twenty years, gave the poet their company and friendship. This must have been very helpful to him.

In those days, with the inadequate knowledge of practically all the periods of Indian history and under the stress of the nascent Indian nationalism, Tagore's, as of other leading intellectuals', attention was more or less confined to the ancient period of our history. And the history of the struggles between the Muslim powers on the one hand and the Rajputs, Marathas and Sikhs on the other was looked at from the point of view of what may, in the absence of a better term, be called Hindu nationalism.

Tagore could not, for a long time, free himself from this narrow approach to the study of India's past. Then, even from his boyhood he had been strongly influenced by the Upanishadic thought, and by the colour and atmosphere of the classical age of our history. These two factors, one personal and the other national, deeply affected his approach to Indian history, as is evident from all his historical and creative writings between, roughly speaking, 1890 and 1905-6. It is easy to find in these writings a highly idealised and glorified picture of ancient Indian life and institutions.

But, by about 1905-6, when our national political movements were beginning to turn racially aggressive, which resulted in violent activities and generated an outlook intellectually barren, and, socially and culturally, narrow, dogmatic, chauvinistic and obscurantist, he not only gave up his natural political leadership and retired to his *āśrama* at Santiniketan, but also showed signs of a change in his attitude and approach to history. Much of the intellectual and emotional crisis he passed through during the period (1905-10) is, as I have already pointed out, reflected in his epic novel *Gorā*. By about 1910-11, he outgrew the overriding Hindu nationalistic-ideological approach towards history, and adopted a more critical, synthetic and universal approach, which is reflected in his *Bhāratvarshe Itihāseḥ Dhārā*.

But one must at the same time recognise that, even from the very beginning of his historical studies and writings, he brought



to bear on them, despite his Hindu nationalistic approach and idealistic attitude, the awareness of certain fundamental and underlying values and tendencies that had been evolving through the centuries of India's past—values and tendencies that were basically human, liberal, progressive and universal, and hence as much national as universal. Unlike most of his contemporaries he was not chauvinistic, narrow and traditional; therefore, his intellectual transformation from a Hindu nationalist to an Indian humanist and universalist was natural, and was perfectly in keeping with his emotional and intellectual personality. By 1914, but more particularly, by 1917, this transformation was complete. But since that time he did not write anything that might be called historical or even quasi-historical. But between 1914 and 1941, he wrote a long series of socio-political essays (ending with *Sabhyatār Sankat*, Crisis in Civilization, 1941), which have been included in the book, *Kālāntar* (The Transition, 1937). These essays are inspired by, and imbued with, his vision and interpretation of the history of India in the context of world history. His humanist and universal approach to the study of history is nowhere more evident than in these essays.

I will now summarise some of the major conclusions that the poet seems to have reached in the course of his study of Indian history and culture.

His first major conclusion was that the achievements and abilities of different peoples and civilisations should not be judged by the same standard, such as that of political development, which, according to the historiography of his times, was the most common yard-stick of judgement, and, then, that the nature and character of Indian history and culture were not political but primarily social and cultural. Thus, Indian history and culture were not, according to Tagore, state-centred; rather, they grew around the local societies of varying size, nature and character. Tagore's socio-political objective was, therefore, *svadeśī samāj*, that is, self-governing social community and not merely *svadeśī-rāshtra*, which by and large stood only for a politically independent, sovereign state. Since this was his objective, what he was mainly concerned with in the study of Indian history and culture, was the problems of social cohesion and co-operation, social integrity

and social self-reliance, so as to be able to discover the extent to which these traits of the people had left their impress on, and conditioned, the Indian tradition. Whatever, therefore, worked towards disunity and disintegration was evil and was by him discarded and deprecated, categorically and in strong terms.

His second major conclusion was that the main current of Indian history and culture, despite occasional signs of militant and aggressive preoccupations, was towards integration and synthesis of all conflicting and contradictory forces, towards striking for a unity and harmony through all the differences and divergences, towards diverting the many avenues of life towards one common goal, and towards striving for the one in the midst of the many, not by destroying the individuality of the many but by trying to emphasise the deeper common denominator that binds the many together. He substantiated his thesis by a reference to the great diversity in the geographical configuration of our land, the many conflicting and contradictory forces at work in the ethnological composition of our people, in our society and religion, in our politics and economics, and yet to the solid stamp of unity in the geography of the land, the essential continuity of its history, the overriding unity, integration and synthesis that India strove to achieve in the midst of all such conflicts and contradictions. Varied peoples with widely divergent traditions and cultures, he pointed out, met on the soil of Bhāratvarsha. India's greatest problem in history was, therefore, how to adjust and harmonise all such diverse and often contradictory elements into a happy synthesis.

His third important conclusion was that the occasional military and political domination of India by various kings, generals and dynasties of non-Indian origin was but a symptom of the recurrent social evils and economic ills that periodically sapped the vigour and vitality of the Indian society. Casteism and sectarianism, bigotry and narrowness, regional parochialism, greed, misuse of power and privilege, relative and unbalanced disregard of the cult of *Anna Brahma*, that is, of the material requirements of individual and social life, were all basically anti-human and hence unsocial and anti-social. These were the evils that caused periodic disintegration of Indian society and led eventually to her military and political subjugation. The enemies of a country and its people, Tagore seems to

have argued, always lie in ambush within its own body-social, and not outside.

His fourth important conclusion was that no people could really be creatively great and effective by being aggressive and militant in aim, purpose and action, or by the mere acquisition of military and political power. Such acquisitions, in subordination to everything else, are degrading by themselves, and it was his eternal regret that such acquisitions of the largest colonial empire, together with its economic exploitations, had degraded the character and personality of the English people as a whole, and for that matter, those of other Western powers that had followed the same course of history. His one main thesis was that India had, by and large, despite occasional lapses, eschewed the path of aggressive militarism, preferring the path of peace, unity and harmony, which, according to him, were fundamental laws of nature, and hence of human society in all ages.

Another important conclusion, the fifth, that he arrived at through his study of Indian tradition was that no people could achieve greatness by isolating itself from, by ceasing to co-operate with, other peoples whether out of hatred or anger, or out of some superiority or suffering complex. He, therefore, maintained that a people could find its fulfilment as much by cultivating its own soil and by building up its own strength from within as by contact and co-operation with the aims and patterns of life and activities of other peoples of other ages. 'We shall know for certain', says the poet, 'that just as it is futile mendicancy to covet the wealth of others in place of our own, so also it makes for utter destitution to keep ourselves segregated and starved by refusing the gift which is the common heritage of men, just because it is brought to us by a foreign messenger.'

Perhaps many students of Indian history and culture who have studied their subject objectively will not agree with the poet's interpretations as set forth above. But let us not forget that Tagore did not try to write, as a professional historian would, any factual and objective narrative of any phase or aspect of the history and culture of India, nor did he try to write of her whole historical tradition. All that he did was to apply his creative and sensitive mind to the broad facts of



history from the perspective of the fundamental ideas of the time and space to which he belonged in order to find out the main principles that underlay the foundation, the growth and the fulfilment, as also the disintegration, of the Indian society at different stages and phases of its history. Let us not forget also that, in doing so, his main intention was to find out the sources of her strength that gave India her glory and achievements, and also the causes of her weaknesses that led to her decay and disintegration. His aim was thus creative, and his method of study, selective. He, therefore, picked up only those facts of history that seemed to him significant from his point of view, but what was more important was that he interpreted them in such a way as to bring out and underline just those traits and tendencies in the history of his land and people that were broadly humanistic, moral, universal, liberal and progressive; and he discarded those that were narrow, obsolete, obscurantist and retrograde. In a word, he picked up only those seeds that were fertile and had in them the potentiality of yet further growth and expansion. It was in this sense that his aim was creative, because he was trying to create and build up India of his vision and interpretation.

What criticism has one to offer, from the point of view of a modern student of Indian history and culture, against the view and vision presented by the poet?

The first point of criticism will certainly be that he takes a panoramic view of facts and factors, and does not look into the working of details; hence he sees only the wood and not the trees, which means that there must be scores of facts and factors that would militate against his general findings. I cannot but admit the validity of such an argument, but at the same time I am conscious that Tagore would have replied that every age or clime has a central focus or theme of life which is its very essence and which is worked out by the people of the age or clime by means of their collective will, reason and psyche, and that this is reflected in the totality of the life of the period, despite shocks and conflicts, despite aberrations and contradictions. This totality, as reflected in the wood, is what matters in history and not the shocks and conflicts, the aberrations and contradictions as reflected in some trees and plants.

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A second point of criticism will be that Tagore was never conscious of the conflicts and struggles between various classes and sections of the Indian people and their role in shaping the destinies of Indian history and culture. This criticism is only partly true, since he was conscious of, and did take into account, the fact that there was much in the cultural tradition of India which was the result of the conflict among the Brāhmanas, the Kshatriyas, the Vaiśyas, the Śūdras and the countless number of submerged and depressed castes and classes, between Śaivism and Vaishnavism, between Brahmanism and Buddhism, between Hinduism and Islam, for instance, which, he knew, were basically class-conflicts inherent in power and property relations. But he held emphatically that such relations, resulting in class conflicts, could not be the only explanation for the orientation of the course of Indian history and culture, nor could it explain wholly the ideological slant or preference of the Indian people of any given period of their history. Indeed Tagore does not seem to have any faith in a monistic interpretation.

A third point of criticism will be in respect of his finding that Indian history and culture revolved round the social units, big and small, of the people of India, that the story of the evolution of our history and culture is the story of the evolution of our social institution and organisations. He went even further and indicated a social destiny for India, since Indian history, he thought, was ever a society-centred history as against a state-centred history. There can hardly be any doubt that our life was to a very great extent society-centred until the British rule destroyed the socio-economic base of our more or less autonomous village organisation; but the fact remains that in his vision of contemporary India and her future he did feel that the society, as distinguished from the state, would continue to remain the pivot of our life, and that we should consciously work to that end. History has proved that he was wrong. He does not seem to have realised that the state in the history of the West was the natural outcome of the evolutionary social process, that it had grown out of the very conflicts and contradictions in social relations that had been at work there through the centuries, and that a stage was reached there long ago, since when the

society and the state had become coterminous. He did not realise that more or less similar factors were at work in India too; it had already become clear when he was born. But this fact of history does not seem to have engaged his attention, perhaps because of his main ideological preoccupation with the idea of the perfection of the individual as such in a given society.

But, on the whole, his main conclusions are valid—that Indian history and culture have been an unending experiment in the co-existence and integration of different races and peoples, of different religions and philosophies, of various classes and castes, of various ways of living such as are apparently in conflict; that in Indian history there has been an unceasing quest for the purity of means and ends, for unity and harmony in the 'midst of discord and diversity, for human values of love, charity, piety, tolerance and understanding; that these should be the motive forces of contemporary and future history and culture of our country, and that these tendencies persist even today in the 'midst of many contradictory trends that we have been facing and in spite of many errors that we have been committing. We may remember that Tagore was the first to discover this tradition in our times; he was also the first to lay down in clear and precise terms the lineaments of this history and to formulate our contemporary national ideology along these lines.

## 15. Social Attitudes

IN ONE of the letters he sent home from Soviet Russia in 1930, Tagore, writing in the context of social change, said: 'Any teaching concerning man must have human nature for its chief element. How far it will harmonise with human nature is a matter of time.'<sup>1</sup> Less than four years later, on 26 February, 1934, he wrote an essay on *Palli-Prakriti* (Character of our Villages), in the course of which too he said: 'The aim of our age is to make our human settlements self-governing units. . . . This cannot be effected through revolution. Those who ride the horse of revolution jump from one incongruity to another, trying to find an easy access to truth . . .'<sup>2</sup> It is not difficult to recognise in both these remarks the voice of one who sees the need for conscious efforts to effect social changes, the voice of one who would even himself act, if and when necessary, to bring about such changes, provided such changes, reformist or radical, were in harmony with nature. Here is essentially the intellectual attitude of a liberal who believes that any social change to be enduringly effective and abidingly creative must emanate from a change in human psychology. As a poet and artist, deeply idealistic and imaginative by training and temperament, and highly sensitive to the political humiliation, economic bankruptcy, social degradation, religious orthodoxy and obscurantism, and educational backwardness that plagued his country and his people, Tagore, in his occasional anger and impatience, gave vent, at times, to his revolutionary fancies, and cried out for a total scrapping of the social order in which he lived and had been nurtured. But such expressions were few and far between, and were followed, sometimes in the same poem or essay, invariably by a cadence and rhythm of peace, of order and harmony. Fundamentally, his mind and imagination worked in constructive channels, and his conception of social change was gradual and reformist;

<sup>1</sup> *Letters from Russia*, Visva-Bharati, 1960. Translated by Sasadhar Sinha, p. 117.

<sup>2</sup> Free rendering from the original Bengali by the present author.



he believed in slow adaptation, in harmonious blending of tradition and progress, that is, in evolutionary social progress. Even his visit to Russia and his admiration for what the Soviet revolution had achieved, did not affect any fundamental change in his attitude; what they did was mainly to strengthen many of his earlier views and convictions.

Considering the background of his family and the social and intellectual atmosphere in which his formative years and years of early maturity were spent, this acceptance of a liberal and evolutionary social philosophy was but natural. The protestant religious sect, the Brāhmo Samāj, of which his father Devendranath was the leader, was the direct spiritual and intellectual inheritor of the ideology of Rammohun Roy. It stood on the side of rationalism and scientific attitude on the one hand and a deep attachment to, and regard for, the purer spiritual and cultural tradition of India on the other. Modern ideas of progress and social change were thus sought to be blended with the best and the purest of the Indian tradition. Slowly but surely Tagore was acquiring a synthetic outlook during the decades when he was growing into maturity, for he breathed all the while the atmosphere of his family and that of the contemporary Bengali intellectual elite which was at the time saturated with contemporary English and French liberal thought and ideology. The genesis of Tagore's social philosophy has to be sought in this background and in this atmosphere of contemporary Bengal. His contribution to our socio-political thought lies in the fact that he not only strengthened the synthetic outlook initiated by Rammohun Roy, but carried it forward, brought it up to date and placed it on a broader base of national and international import. By the time he was in his forties he had witnessed the rise of Indian nationalism, the movements for social and religious reform, the changing pattern of economic development, the new outlook on education, and, finally, the growing consciousness of internationalism. He was one of the first Indians to realise that all these were but the symptoms of deeper social and cultural changes that were taking place in India, and that all these were but the manifestations of a deeper urge for national self-expression among those, at any rate, who were socially conscious and intellectually modern in

spirit and outlook. He was also one of those who sought to give to all the diverse and unrelated ideas and activities a unified and national theme and purpose. His life and his work, including his writings, bear ample evidence of this. Enriched by the full inheritance of what was best in the Indian tradition, he came to accept the spirit of the modern age—rationalism, spirit of enquiry, sense of history, etc.—in a perfectly natural manner. Together they imparted to his mind and personality a dignity, a poise and a balance that were all his own. He could, therefore, effect this thematic and purposive unification in a much better and more comprehensive manner than could any of his forbears. Moreover, his respect for tradition and his regard for the spirit of the modern age with its scientific outlook, coupled with the poise and dignity of his mind and personality, imparted a tone of authenticity to his liberal and evolutionary social philosophy, which was remarkable for his times.

The protestant atmosphere of the Tagore family and the intellectual environment of the times helped him to develop an objectivity of outlook on contemporary social and religious issues. His father was an intensely religious person; so was he himself. But the family was entirely free from all sorts of religious bigotry and superstition, and their religious attitude was characterised by a deep humanist and catholic outlook. Besides, he was a poet, an artist of great sensitivity and perception. This religious and poetic attitude tinged also Tagore's social attitude. Moreover, despite his involvement in the *Swadesi* Movement for a short while, despite his active and lifelong interest in the political events and tendencies of the country, he was not essentially a political being, and his approach to political issues of his times was always conditioned and determined by his preoccupation with social issues. Very early in life the hundred and one evils that plagued our society engaged his attention; in poem after poem throughout his creative life he attacked them, sometimes with charity and sympathy, and therefore with humour, but often with biting and bitter satire. In essay after essay he tried to make his countrymen see reason and he pointed out to them that much of their political and economic ills was due to their social backwardness, due to their gross socio-religious obscurantism that obtained

amongst them. By the time he was in his early forties, he had already worked out his first main thesis, viz. that the breakdown of our traditional local institutions and rural economy was mainly responsible for our social disintegration, and that the only way to bring about social cohesion and to eradicate social evils was to resurrect our social institutions (but not the institution of caste which he was dead against, since it had long lost its social and economic function) with their humanity, and revive our rural economy. The village indeed became the main focus of his interest.

His second thesis, which he enunciated in *Svadeśi Samāj*, was that the pivot of Indian life and civilisation was not the political state but the autonomous local social unit called *samāj*, which gave to the individual the economic security and protection from the state which he craved for. '... The seat of life of different civilisations', he argued, 'is differently placed in the body politic. Where the responsibility for the welfare of the people lies, there beats the heart of the nation; and if a blow should fall thereon, the whole nation is wounded unto death. In England the overthrow of the state would mean the destruction of the nation. But disaster can only overtake our country when its social body, its *samāj*, is crippled. That is why we never staked our all to resist a change of sovereignty, but clung with might and main to the freedom of our *samāj*.'

Indeed this autonomous social unit, occupying a place between the individual and the state, became the core of his social thought, so much so that he came to posit a purely social destiny for India, to which I referred in the previous chapter. Theoretically speaking, Tagore's idea of freedom had almost exclusively a social content; if there ever was a political content in it, it was very vague indeed. The idea of a free, independent, sovereign state in a political sense does not seem to have made any impact on his thought and imagination.

His next important deduction was that many of the socio-religious evils our people suffered from, much of the poverty, the poor health and sanitation, and the abomination of human dignity that obtained in our society, were due to superstitious ignorance, lack of education and mutual co-



operation. Education, especially children's education, therefore, became one of his life-long passions and he proved himself to be one of our first original thinkers and experimenters in this field. He also became, for the same reason, an equally ardent advocate of social and village co-operatives which he came to accept as an important means for the achievement of social cohesion, self-help and interdependence on the one hand and of partial solution of the atmosphere of fatalistic helplessness and of rural poverty on the other.

Despite his emotional concern for, and literary pre-occupation with, social, political and educational issues and problems, from his early youth, he does not seem to have acquired a relatively realistic understanding of, or taken any active interest in them before he was in his thirties and forties (roughly from 1892 to about 1910). It was during these years that, because of his being obliged to shoulder the responsibility of looking after the family estates in different parts of Bengal and Orissa and because of his direct involvement in the socio-religious and political movements of the times, he found himself face to face with our social and economic issues, with our educational and political problems. His keen and sensitive mind was affected as much by the momentous ideas and events of these two decades as by his close familiarity with the socio-political ideas and speculations of the nineteenth century English liberal and positivist thinkers. He, therefore, reacted very readily to the issues and problems that stared him in the face, and, in the light of his personal experiences, he pondered over them through long stretches of time, and, occasionally, recorded, in letters to begin with and later in essays and addresses, his reactions, his slowly forming ideas. Alongside, he had started putting his ideas into practice in the family estates in eastern and northern Bengal, and at Surul, a village a couple of miles away from the Santiniketan *āśrama*. Gradually, but inevitably, his ideas crystallised into a set of pragmatic items based on certain social principles which he had come to accept. These principles were social balance and harmony, social unity and cohesion, self-help and co-operation, justic and humanity and freedom of the individual as consistent with social duties and obligations. The most important items in the programme of

work were: first, reconstruction and rejuvenation of the village through self-help; secondly, building up of national strength, not through political agitation or through petitioning to powers that be (he was impatient of both), but through constructive efforts directed towards organising autonomous social units, which he called *Svadeśi Samāj*, sort of a parallel government in a given region; thirdly, rearing up a system and evolving a method of education that would help society to build up the individual in the context of the society itself, the nation and humanity; and, fourthly, creating a net-work of village co-operatives, not merely to meet the pressing problem of rural impoverishment, but to encourage self-help and mutual trust among our illiterate village folk. The co-operative principle was thus a moral issue with him.

These principles and items of social work, once accepted, were never given up. Up to the last of his days, when he could no longer actively participate in the items of work he had initiated, he came back, again and again, to these basic principles and urged his countrymen to adopt them and take up his programme. From the nineties of the last century, but more creatively and significantly during the first two decades of the twentieth, his principal preoccupation, outside of his basic work as a votary of the muse of poetry, was the regeneration of our society through constructive social efforts, which, he thought, was the only means of infusing into our moribund society a spirit of self-generating strength and dynamism, the only means of creating an atmosphere of hope and faith. The question of success or failure of the various experiments he undertook in the fields of rural agriculture, education, co-operation, village reconstruction or community projects, for instance, is, to my mind, irrelevant in this connection, since his aim was to give our contemporary socio-political leaders and workers a jolt, to make them give up their agitational and begging approach. His aim was to set them thinking in new lines and to prompt them to work in new directions, which he sought to lay down in clear and precise terms. He was indeed working as a path-finder. Much of what he said during those decades went unheeded, much of what he did remained unnoticed at the time; but they were not all in vain, since decades later, after Independence,

when the work of social reconstruction came to be taken up as a national issue, many of the threads we picked up to weave our social fabric with, were those that had been spun by Tagore; application of science and technology to agriculture, community development projects, village co-operatives, afforestation, for instance.

## 2

During the nineties of the last century, as I have already said, Tagore was obliged to look after the management of his family estates in eastern and northern Bengal and in Orissa. This brought him face to face with the day to day life of the people of rural-agricultural Bengal, and the variety of human relations he came to experience here are reflected in the short stories he wrote during this period and in his well-known novel *Gorā* (1910) written somewhat later; the creative life of this people is discussed in his essays collected in *Lok-Sāhitya* (Folk Literature, 1907). But the origin and evolution of his social attitudes can be traced in the series of letters that he wrote to his young niece, Indira, already referred to more than once, and, somewhat later, to his friends, including the scientist Jagadis Chandra Bose. They can also be traced in his long series of letters, essays and addresses, written or delivered during the first decades of the century, and, finally, in his *Letters from Russia*. His social attitudes emanated from his love and sympathy for his unfortunate countrymen, which prompted him to make systematic study of their lives; and this resulted in his actually taking up certain experiments, in a small scale but with all seriousness of purpose, at Surul and Bhuvandanga, two villages not very far from his *āśrama* school at Santiniketan, and also at two other places in his family estates, Shelidah and Patisar. Already during the first decade of this century we find him feeling the necessity of reliable statistical survey of the social-economy of our villages, drawing up integrated plans for what we today call community projects at the village level—projects that included, among other things, items like community grain stores, consumer co-operatives, co-operative banks, schools and



literacy centres, health centres and centres for arbitration of village disputes. In a word, we find him planning for autonomous self-reliant village units, for *palli-samājas* as he preferred to call them. We also find him pleading for application of modern science and technology, including modern labour-saving devices, to our age-old traditional methods of agriculture, and himself doing the same at Surul. He sent his son, his son-in-law and the son of a very intimate friend of his to the United States for education and training in the science and technique of modern agriculture. More; we find him arguing not only in favour of co-operative farming but also for a sort of union among the peasants for the protection of their own rights and interests.

At the same time, we find him pleading with the *zamindars* (landlords) to look after the interests of the poor peasants and artisans, pleading with them to act not as owners but as trustees of the land and property that really belonged to their subjects: 'In this connection, I would appeal to the *zamindars*. Unless they put their hearts into the matter of giving fresh life to the village, the work can never be thoroughly done. Let them not be afraid that the returning strength of the *ryot* will be a menace to their self-interest. To seek to remove all obstacles in the way of irresponsible dominion is like carrying the dynamite in one's pocket; when chance comes the arm of oppression smites back the carrier. Let the *ryots* be strong, so that even the temptation to oppress them may not exist. Is the *zamindar* a shopkeeper, that he should calculate only his petty takings? Unless he sedulously cultivates his ancestral privilege of giving he will soon find the remnants of his power departed.'<sup>1</sup> His theory of owners of property and capital acting as trustees for the welfare of the people sounds very much like what Tolstoy had earlier and Gandhi later preached. Tagore, during the decades I am now discussing, was still under the impression that social change could be effected by a change of heart on the part of the powers that be, just as Gandhi did during the decades that followed. Both felt very deeply for the unfortunate have-nots

<sup>1</sup> 'The One Nationalist Party', in *Greater India*, op. cit. Extract from the Presidential Address in Bengali by the poet, at the Bengal Provincial Conference at Pabna, in 1908.

of our society, both cried their hearts out for them and took the more fortunate ones of the upper classes to task for not carrying out their duties and obligations towards them. Indeed, Tagore as a landlord and as one belonging to the upper classes did not hesitate even for once to bring his utmost share of contribution to what he believed was his duty and obligation, and Gandhi claimed to identify himself, in his pattern of life and behaviour, with the underdogs of society. But neither Tagore nor Tolstoy nor Gandhi ever questioned the basis of the social arrangement that obtained in contemporary Russia or India, and since they never did so, none of them could find a satisfactory solution of the basic problem that faced them.

But Tagore was honest enough to admit in later life that charity that issued out of an emotional attitude of doing good and making personal sacrifices for the have-nots of society, howsoever worthy and necessary at times, could not be a permanent solution of the basic ills that our society suffered from. In one of his letters from Russia (1930), he had a very significant comment to make: 'But the trouble is that nothing permanent can be built on charity; to try to do good from without is vitiated at every step. Only by becoming equals can one render real help. In any case I have not been able to think it all out satisfactorily, but to think that it is inevitable, that the progress of civilisation could be maintained only by keeping down the bulk of humanity and denying it its human rights is a reproach to the human mind. ... Man cannot do good to those whom he does not respect. At any rate, no sooner is one's self-interest at stake than a clash ensues. A radical solution of this problem is being sought in Russia.'<sup>1</sup>

From his ideas and actions referred to above it is easy to see that with Tagore the political problem in India was linked up with the economic; indeed he was one of the earliest of our leaders of thought and action to have thought and acted as he did. When, during the last decade of the nineteenth and the first decade of the twentieth century, he came into intimate contact with our villages, the traditional rural economy, sustained by an autonomous social organisation that had very little to do with the political organisation of the times,

had not yet completely broken down. But it was then almost on its last legs. The poet's analysis of the disintegration of the traditional social organisation, which is laid bare in his essays and addresses written roughly between 1890 and 1930, is clear and revealing, and an economic historian would not find many faults with his analysis. The coming of the British heralded a violent break with the past. The western conception of the state and its introduction in India dealt a death blow to the entire fabric of Indian social organisation by replacing the set of unwritten laws that traditionally governed our local social units with a set of written laws administered by the state. The individual was thus directly brought into contact with the state, and, since the state was administered by an alien authority for their own interests, the individual was set often in direct opposition to the state. Traditionally, the individual had enjoyed certain economic and political safeguards afforded by the social unit he belonged to. But now he was deprived of them altogether, and he was thus thrown completely at the mercy of the state. British colonial economic interests in India also led to the breakdown of the not-very-affluent but relatively more balanced rural economy of the country. First, far-reaching changes in the system of land tenure eventually led to the impoverishment of our peasantry and to the loss of whatever economic freedom and security they had possessed; it led to the creation of an increasingly swelling number of landless peasants and a new class of land-owning interests heedless of their social obligations. Secondly, imported British and foreign-finished goods eventually spelt the ruin of our indigenous arts and crafts which were important sources of rural wealth. And, thirdly, there was very little industrial development, for the British and other western powers were interested only in exploiting the raw materials produced in their empires, and not in rearing up industries there or in the application there of science and technology in agriculture. This led to further impoverishment of the countryside.

The above is the context in which Tagore found himself and which furnishes the background and the logic of his social attitudes and actions. His main motivation was to rebuild the disintegrating rural social units which would



provide a buffer between the individual and the state, and safeguard the freedom and security of the individual, and which would also at the same time impart to the social unit and the individual the strength to resist the intrusions of the state, forge unity and cohesion among the people, and instil in them hope and faith by the principle of co-operation, by changing the system of education, and by the introduction of modern scientific methods and techniques in farming and agriculture. He sought to build up the autonomous social units of his conception on these three planks.

The 'co-operative principle' engaged his attention during the first decade of this century when he said, 'The time has come when co-operative methods must step in and prevent the results of our labour from sliding down the inclined plane which leads into the foreigners' granary. Modern labour-saving appliances must be freely utilised and this cannot be done without combination.' Since then he ever remained wedded to this principle, experimented with it, put it into practice, and wrote and spoke on the subject whenever there was an occasion to make his countrymen conscious of its social and economic significance. Much later, in 1930, he wrote in the concluding section of *Letters from Russia*:<sup>1</sup>

I pray for the victory of the co-operative principle in the production and control of the wealth of our villages, for it recognises human nature in not scorning the desire and opinion of the co-operators. Nothing succeeds by antagonising human nature. [But] the regrettable thing is that until now the co-operative enterprise in Bengal has lost itself solely in money-lending ... it has been of no service to the task of production and consumption ... We must perhaps shamefully admit that the qualities which make co-operation easy are lacking in our character. Mutual trust is feeble in those who are themselves weak. Indeed, absence of self-esteem is the basis of disrespect for others. Loss of self-respect from long servitude has culminated in this degradation. They will accept with bowed head the rule of their masters, but cannot tolerate the guidance of their own class... However difficult the solution, there is no other way; nature must be corrected by creating opportunities for combining the forces of mind and body. It is not by granting co-operative

<sup>1</sup> Pages 122-24.

credit but by combined effort, thereby making the villages co-operation-minded, that we shall save the villages.

The moral purpose in Tagore's approach to the question of co-operation is thus clear and unequivocal.

In his educational experiments too the co-operative idea was brought to play an important role, since one of his basic theme was to employ education to the aid of village reconstruction. His small and experimental rural reconstruction centre at Surul, which later grew up (1921-22) to be an Institute of Rural Reconstruction, was sought to be managed and administered as a live centre for co-operative activities connected with the basic needs of rural life.

It must co-operate with the villages round it, cultivate land, breed cattle, spin cloths, press oil from oil-seeds; it must produce all the necessities, devising the best means, using the best materials and calling science to its aid. Its very existence should depend upon the success of its industrial activities carried out on the co-operative principle, which will unite the teachers and students and villagers of the neighbourhood in a living and active bond of necessity. This will give also a practical industrial training, whose motive force is not the greed of profit.<sup>1</sup>

Since he believed that learning to be fruitful and effective should be correlated with the concrete experiences of life, this application of the co-operative principle in rural reconstruction was but an experiment in one of his educational ideas.

But, in those days of agitational politics and emotional struggles against political and economic enslavement, his views on rural reconstruction through self-help, as embodied in the co-operative principle and programme, his fervent pleadings for collective constructive work went altogether unheeded, and he had to undertake a lonely journey which he never gave up. Not until Gandhi descended on the Indian political scene, and even after that for a decade, our political struggles were ever sought to be linked up with our social and economic problems; at best, and that too with only a few of our leaders, such problems were taken up only as agitational issues. It is only in the recent years that Tagore's ideas and plans are

<sup>1</sup> *Creative Unity*, p. 200.

making themselves felt in our contemporary efforts at village reconstruction. With seventy-two per cent of our people of working age still living on rural agriculture and other allied operations that yield over one half of our national income, and with more than eighty-two per cent of our population still living in the villages in spite of the seemingly large-scale flow of people into the urban areas, Tagore's vision of our villages and rural communities retains its validity even today.

Therefore, these 'villages must be infused with life', he argued, 'which is neither trivial nor narrow; which neither dwarfs human nature nor keeps it in darkness. . . . I want our villages to enjoy full human dignity and wealth instead of being content with the leavings and surplus of the towns.'<sup>2</sup> He wanted our villages to be rehabilitated, yet he did not want our rural communities to go back to their century-ridden traditionally rustic way of life confined within the narrow limits of their villages. He wanted their rehabilitation in the glory of the modern world.

When I wish our villages to revive, I never wish for the return to rusticity. Rusticity is a species of superstition and of education, intellect, belief and activity, which is unrelated to anything outside the village limits. It is not only distinct from the spirit of the modern age, but opposed to it.<sup>3</sup>

Tagore's diagnosis of the two main reasons for our social disintegration—increasingly widening gulf between the upper castes and classes on the one hand and the lower ones on the other, and between the Hindus and the Muslims, that is, the horizontal and vertical divisions of our people—was no doubt correct, and it shows the realism of his social vision. The remedies he laid down also seem to have been equally correct. But the agency he conceived for administering these remedies seems to have been somewhat conditioned by his general view of life and things. First, being a firm believer in harmony as a natural law, he posited human love and sympathy as the remedy for social disharmony, from which it would seem that he did not quite see that such disharmony and lack of

<sup>2</sup> *Letters from Russia*, pp. 122-3.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.



equilibrium were the results of tensions and conflicts inherent in any system of social relation based on consideration of merits of individual property, and that love, sympathy, idealisation of suffering or atonement by individuals could not really be expected permanently to solve the problems of social disintegration. Secondly, his faith lay in the individual and in the character of individual personality. He therefore believed that the reconstruction of our villages would be effected by young men and women of idealism, will and character, who would, on their own, choose to live in the villages, know their problems, speak the language of, and be one with, the villagers, and who would, by their personal example and intimate participation, revive the rural arts and crafts, the rural ceremonies and festivals, and organise village co-operative societies, and social and educational institutions, just as he himself chose to do and actually did in his family estates. He did not pause to realise that the social situation was not such in which large numbers of persons of his conception, who would reconstruct the villages, were likely to be found. Thirdly, the two social attributes which he emphasised most were self-help and a spirit of service and sacrifice. These are virtues of individuals which could be brought into collective play only by and through an organised movement directed towards social purposes set by organised institutions, groups or parties; otherwise in the long run they would prove to be ineffective, if not abortive altogether. Yet, by training and temperament, Tagore was somewhat allergic to any largescale organised movement or to big institutions which, he thought, tended to curb individual initiative, thought and action and hence growth of individual personality. They also tended to generate power consciousness in large organisations or institutions themselves and in the persons who happened to be at their controls. Indeed, it was perhaps his abhorrence of power, which, he thought, usually tended to corrupt individuals, groups and societies, that made him all but ignore the role of the state in his socio-political thinking. He was deeply concerned with problems of social relations and social organisation, but it does not seem to have occurred to him that the State was the inevitable outcome of evolving and changing social relations. Society, in Tagore's conception, was

an aggregate of individuals, each of whom should be given the opportunity to try to develop into a person, but he does not seem to have worked out in what way the person would stand in relation to a wider social organisation or the state. His pre-occupation with the person seems to have precluded the consideration of wider social issues without which the question of social reconstruction could hardly be viewed in its entirety.

Apart from the deep tint of romanticism and the subtle atmosphere of individualism that characterise his vision of social reconstruction, apart from his nostalgic hope that the princes and landlords would function as benevolent trustees and as men of power and character by volunteering themselves to the pursuit of social welfare out of sheer humanitarian instinct, Tagore's approach to the problem of rural reconstruction suffered from a lack of awareness of the role of cities and towns in any modern civilised socio-economic organisation. Born and brought up in the growing city of Calcutta and playing, as he did, by far the larger part of his life's role in this great city that reflected the changing social phenomena of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, it is rather strange that the poet did not see the deep significance of towns and cities in this context of social reconstruction. Indeed, as one reviews his writings on this specific point, one cannot help feeling that he looked upon towns and cities at best as necessary evils. As a corollary, his attitude towards modern industrial civilisation was also one of sufferance, and not unlike that of Gandhi.

Yet Tagore's vision of social reconstruction was potent enough to create an atmosphere of social self-help and it forged a few instruments for effecting such social changes as he envisaged. These and his incisive and continuous indictment of the outworn caste-system and his relentless criticism of our hieratic priestly orders and their insidious doping of the ignorant masses, of our blind religious prejudices and meaningless social inhibitions, all went to create a climate of social opinion that prepared our minds for welcoming bigger social changes. Whether such changes were brought about or are being attempted to be brought about or not is an altogether different matter.

Tagore was not, as I have already said, what one calls a political being. Yet such was the environment in which he grew up that he could hardly help being drawn, during the first decade of this century, into the flow tide of the *Swadeshi* and Anti-partition movements in Bengal—the first organised and articulated expression of the passion for freedom from political bondage. Later, he hardly ever felt the urge to join any political movement, far less to lead any such. Yet it was his destiny to stand by his people at moments of crisis, to voice their agony of suffering and humiliation, to enter passionate protests on their behalf, and to warn them against, or admonish them for, what he considered mean or narrow, immoral or vulgar, retrograde or reactionary in their political thinking, programme or action. He was thus, to the end of his life, regarded as their mentor, guide and conscience, and was recognised as their 'great sentinel' as of the enslaved and suffering humanity elsewhere. The rough and tumble of political life he always abhorred and wanted to avoid; nevertheless, he was again and again drawn into politics.<sup>1</sup>

It must, however, be pointed out that Tagore's interest in politics appears to have been basically intellectual, and, since politics is concerned with human societies and problems of human welfare, his approach to political affairs was fundamentally humanistic, and hence constructive. Freedom or liberty as a political concept interested him very deeply because he considered its absence to be a great hindrance to the growth of human personality. Political slavery degraded not only those on whom it was imposed but also those who imposed it on others; it was anti-human, in a word. A very simple proposition, but very crucial and significant with Tagore, since it reveals the nature of his approach to political questions.

<sup>1</sup> In a letter to his friend C. F. Andrews, he writes: 'It is not true that I do not obstruct outside reality; on the contrary, it offers a standpoint and helps me in my natural relationship with others. But when that standpoint itself becomes a barricade, then something in me asserts that my place is somewhere else. I have a great deal of the patriot and politician in me, and therefore I am frightened of them; and I have an inner struggle against submitting myself to their sway.' (*Letters to a Friend*, Allen and Unwin, 1928)



His considerable writings on basic and topical political problems of the day and his occasional involvement in the political affairs of his times cannot be disassociated from his other writings and activities, nor can they be viewed apart from his total view of life. More important is the fact that his political thinking is very closely related with his social thinking and with his reading and understanding of the history of India and the world. His studies and explorations in history and the formulation of his social and political thoughts ran alongside of each other, one contributing to the other; and it was during the last decade of the nineteenth but more consistently during the first two decades of the twentieth century that his basic ideas in these areas were formed. They were later amended somewhat as a result of his visit to the Soviet Russia in 1930 and by the impact of the world situation during the twenties and thirties, but they only went to strengthen his basic convictions and confirm his earlier views and ideas.

Such ideas and convictions are formulated in a number of essays and addresses that he wrote during the first two decades of this century. Out of his studies in history and the process and character of India's social evolution he posited, first, that India's genius and destiny were not primarily political but social; it was not the king and the state but the local social unit that regulated the life process of the people of this country; and it was the local social institutions that were the 'seats of life' of Indian civilisation. He argued, therefore, that political work in India must concern itself mainly, if not exclusively, with constructive social work in the villages. Secondly, he realised quite early in his career that winning a point in political debates was a futile pastime, that there was humiliation and pathetic humour in constitutional agitation through servile petitions and angry resolutions, and that passionate and even violent outbursts of anger and hatred against the power that be, in this case, the British ruling authority, were self-defeating in their purpose. Instead he pleaded for a philosophy of self-help, of building up of the country's own power and strength from within by a reorganisation and revitalisation of our villages which, in his opinion, happened to be the real seats of power. Thirdly, he saw the

nature of the political struggle in India as one between an alien and hence uninformed and unsympathetic state-power on the one hand and a disintegrating social order on the other. British rule, he argued, had once brought the rich gifts of western culture—its science and literature, its liberal thought, its humanism, its love of freedom—to India's precincts, but as this rule grew in power and strength it lost its civilising character; the cult of political power and economic greed burnt all its rich gifts into ashes and reduced it to a soulless machine that knew only how to administer law and order and to exploit the country and its people for the rulers' own ends. The course of world history, as he understood it on the eve of the First World War and during the years that immediately followed, was composed of state powers, exclusively western, greedily building up empires and feeding themselves upon the countless number of their imperial subjects in Asia and Africa, and, therefore, each jealous of the other and warring amongst themselves in their mad competition for more gain and more power—all this in the name of an exclusive cult called nationalism. Nationalism he thus came to equate with what he called imperialism. He, therefore, recognised that with such an alien state-power operating in the country, the disintegrating social order—which was increasingly becoming conscious of its past history and cultural tradition and which was being fed by western science, literature and socio-political thought—was bound to open up areas of conflict. Besides, there was also a moral question involved in the imperialist cult of political power and economic profit; from the point of view of liberal humanism, to which Tagore subscribed, it was an immoral cult that must be opposed and fought against, if necessary. Fourthly, Tagore admitted in consequence the necessity of political struggles for freedom from political and economic bondage imposed by an alien power, but he argued that if an immoral issue is to be fought against, the means adopted to fight it should be moral, that is, good ends could only be achieved through good means—through suffering and sacrifice, through purification of one's self. He went even so far as to take the trouble of working out a technique of struggle for his people. As early as 1909 he had written a drama, *Prāyāścitta* (Atonement), in which he pro-

pounded, through the words of the saintly rebel Dhananjay Vairagi, this message and technique of non-violent struggle against the unfeeling and unseeing authorities of power, which included passive resistance, *satyagraha*, non-hatred even for the enemy, no-rent campaign, self-purification and atonement, removal of social evils like untouchability, love and regard for the common man, etc. that were destined, a decade or so later, to be adopted and made familiar by Gandhi in his struggle against the British policy and administration in India. To this approach to the problem of ends and means and to this technique of struggle he remained faithful to the end. Finally, Tagore was probably the first in India to see that our political struggles rested on a narrow social base, waged as they were by a small section of the English-educated gentry, who derived their inspiration from the text-books on political history and philosophy. To that extent their struggles were unreal and their agitation barren. Incessantly, therefore, he emphasised the absolute necessity for our leaders to know deeply our vast countryside with its illiterate and ignorant masses who lived in utter destitution, and to direct our political and social struggles so that they should be in keeping with their day-to-day needs.

Thus, we see, Tagore viewed our political struggles from a new angle, and he showed an altogether new way of achieving our socio-political aspirations. But his vision had little effect in changing the direction of the political movements of the time till, a decade or so later, Gandhi came and, adopting much of what Tagore had thought and felt, led the socio-political movements of India along a new path. In the meanwhile, the futility of constitutional agitation on the one hand and of the aggressive revolutionary acts on the other, the growing economic crisis and problems of increasing poverty of the masses were already having their impact on our political thinking and action, and, when Gandhi came to take the lead and give the call, the change that Tagore was looking for did really take place.

It is not difficult to find fault with Tagore's attitude and approaches to politics and political affairs in the Indian context. Despite the validity of much that he said during the two or three decades that we are here considering, there are a few things in which his ideas do not seem to have been clear or well-thought out. First, when he posited that India's genius



and destiny were social and not political, he seems to have ignored the simple historical fact that the introduction of British rule had altogether changed the character of political sovereignty of pre-British India when the local social institutions were allowed to function more or less undisturbed, if not altogether unaffected, by any dynastic or other changes in sovereignty. Assumption of power by the British brought about vast and rapid political and economic transformation of the Indian social order, leading eventually to the social disintegration, of which Tagore was so acutely conscious. What, therefore, was true of India's ancient and medieval past, so correctly diagnosed by the poet, was not true of the times he was referring to. Therefore to think of and make plan for social reconstruction in a situation where the political and economic interests of an alien state-power were incessantly at work, undermining existing and traditional social institutions, was certainly somewhat idealistic, if not romantic. Yet, at the same time, one cannot but admit that this was one of the more important means by which the nation could be taught to be self-reliant, to cultivate its own powers and to turn its face away from the barren field of constitutional wrangles and agitational manoeuvres.

Secondly, when he argued 'that the seat of life of different civilisations was differently placed in the body-politic', implying that the course of socio-political evolution in India was different from that in the western countries, he was ignoring the fact that, as elsewhere so in India, the character of the state was always somewhat determined and conditioned by the character of social relations of a given time and place, and that at no time of her history was India an exception to this general sociological process.

Thirdly, while he was very much concerned with the problem of maladjustments and imbalances in our social relations, doubly complicated by our caste and communal inhibitions, which, according to him, were the main reasons for our social disintegration, he seems to have forgotten to take into consideration the nature and character of property-relationship in our society which usually plays a very dominant, almost a determining, role in the sphere of social relationship, and hence in politics.

Fourthly, while Tagore was very keen on maintaining and strengthening an intimate relationship between Indian and western cultures, he was at the same time highly critical of western imperialist expansionism, and it does not seem to have occurred to him that such relationship as he was aiming at was, till then, based on the economic foundation of the relation between the exploiter and the exploited within the capitalist structure of the western nation-states of the time, of which colonial expansionism was only a consequence. Yet we must admit that even if his reading and analysis of history were not altogether correct, his criticism of economic greed and imperialist expansionism of western nation-states was most effective as a moral and political protest, and it served well the needs of the hour. Later, after his Russian visit, he seems to have been revising his views on the process of history and becoming more and more conscious of the basic economic issues that conditioned the pattern of world-politics.

Fifthly, when he argued that rural reconstruction alone could solve India's basic socio-political problems he was laying too much stress on it. He does not seem to have taken into account that effective rural reconstruction was not possible without large-scale changes in the system of land tenure that then prevailed, that is, without attacking the institution of landlordism. All the time he was accusing the landlords for not discharging what he considered to be their duties and responsibilities; yet they were just the creatures of the system, of the institution.

Tagore's diagnosis of the basic cause of the First World War was simple and direct. It was the greed for power and profit of the mutually jealous national states of the west which in its turn was a product, he thought, of the nineteenth century cult of nationalism. Inded he regarded nationalism as a characteristic product of European history and civilisation, and he held it responsible for many of the ills of our age, one of the two major ills being fratricidal wars amongst themselves due to clash of interests, and the other, aggressive imperialist expansionism on the part of western nation-states in Asia and Africa. It is easy to see that Tagore's basic assumption was that nationalism and imperialism were synonymous, and it was

on this assumption that he based his English essays and addresses incorporated in *Nationalism* (1917). He argued further that the 'basis of nationalism was wanting in India', because of our 'social inadequacy' as reflected in our lack of racial and communal unity and integration, and hence the basic problem in India was not the growth of national consciousness and political freedom but social cohesion, unity and integration. Here he was only repeating his own finding that 'the problem in India was not political but social', a theme that he underlined again and again. 'A nation, in the sense of the political and economic union of a people', defines Tagore, 'is that aspect which a whole population assumes when organised for a mechanical purpose.' A nation in his conception had thus no organic relation with society and had therefore no integral and natural social function. Because of these basic assumptions, he pronounced himself very strongly against the creed of nationalism and retained his opposition unto the last.

That in any liberal and progressive mind of Tagore's nature the aggressive and predatory aspects of nationalism would generate profound distaste and that he would react strongly was only too natural. It has to be admitted that his essays and addresses did have some effect in making the world conscious of how the creed of nationalism can be taken advantage of to further the aggressive and predatory instincts of powerful peoples and nations. A student of history and politics would, however, argue that this aggressive and predatory pattern of behaviour on the part of western nation-states of the nineteenth and twentieth century was the product of colonial and imperialist ambitions rather than of nationalism; that nationalism tended to be aggressive when west European societies came to be dominated by monopoly capitalism which sustained and nourished itself by the exploitation of subject peoples and countries of backward economy; and that it was at such a stage that monopoly capitalism transformed itself into imperialism and used the respective nation-states as political means to gain their economic ends. Nationalism could not, therefore, be regarded as synonymous with imperialism, as Tagore argued.

Besides, the poet's argument that a nation is an artificial aggregate 'organised for a mechanical purpose' is somewhat



difficult to sustain in the face of what happened in recent history. European nation-states were the results of organic growth of local or regional societies under the pressure of common socio-cultural traditions as much as of common economic interests. National consciousness is thus, roughly speaking, another word for the consciousness of the need for social integration on the basis of common traditions and for better economic organisation of increasingly larger social groups. The evolution of nationalism in India was also characterised by similar consciousness of the need for similar social enlargement and integration; for it became increasingly clear that these could not be achieved except by radical changes, social, economic and political. The problem of political freedom in India was thus an essential corollary of the rise of national consciousness; and that was why the former was as urgent as the latter was natural and organic.

That it was so will be clearer from what happened in recent decades in western and south-eastern Asia and in different regions of Africa. Indeed, the social phenomenon of nationalism has to be regarded today as universal and as an effective means for achieving larger social integration. It is true that loud aggressiveness, hatred of foreigners and of foreign institutions, and moral and physical violence often characterise its behavioural pattern, but these are more often than not the outcome of resistance to forces that tend to thwart the growth of national self-consciousness; they are not inherent in the social phenomenon of nationalism itself.

But whatever one might say about his views on nationalism, Tagore had a point when he gave priority to the problem of social unity and integration in relation to that of political freedom. He was voicing his opinion in the context of what he rightly considered as futile emotional agitation, shameful begging, and barren constitutional phrase-mongering; both he considered to be humiliating and self-defeating. He, therefore, wanted to change the character of our struggle altogether. The question of priority was perhaps thus a question of relative emphasis, and all that he probably meant was that the struggle for political freedom and social unity must go hand in hand; and if so, he was certainly very right. Indeed the necessity of social unity and integration became almost a

passion with him, and when he spoke of social unity and integration he did so not only in the context of local and rural societies but in that of larger Indian national unity as well. Casteism, communalism and provincialism or regionalism, as he discovered very early in his socio-political thinking, were the three enemies of such unity and integration, and he fought a lonely but relentless battle against all three. They still plague our social and national life and occasionally erupt in disturbing outbursts; and this shows that we have not yet been able to achieve complete national unity and integration. But be that as it may, Tagore's uncompromising stand against the system of caste had become pronounced very early in his life, and, during the First World War, when his mind was preoccupied with the question of nationalism, he wrote in his essay on 'Nationalism in India':<sup>1</sup>

And when we talk of Western Nationality we forget that nations there do not have that physical repulsion, one for the other, that we have between different castes. Have we an instance in the whole world where a people who are not allowed to mingle their blood, shed their blood for one another except by coercion or for mercenary purposes? And can we ever hope that these moral barriers against our race amalgamation will not stand in the way of our political unity?

Equally did he feel disturbed by the mutual jealousies and animosities among the provinces and the separatist tendencies that were at work in the different regions of the country. Indian national unity and integration are insistent and recurrent themes in his writings—as much in essays and addresses as in his songs and lyrics. Indeed, his vision of India was the vision of a spirit that unified into one integrated whole diverse races and religions, peoples and cultures, indigenous and foreign that met within the borders of India. The well-known poem 'Bhārata-ŕitha' in *Gītāñjali*, the celebrated novel *Gorā*, and the still more celebrated lyric *Jana-gana-mana*, which today is our national anthem, to cite but three instances, all written between 1909 and 1912, are all but invocations of the ideal and aspiration of Indian national unity. Yet, we find the

<sup>1</sup> *Nationalism*, Macmillan, 1917.

poet, on the eve of the Second World War, writing in a letter to one of his friends 'that inspite of the uniting centre which the Congress represented, the provinces were showing lamentable signs of separatist tendencies.' Here, too, the poet's was, at that time, a lonely cry, and we are still paying the price for not having paid sufficient attention to this aspect of our national problem.

Other serious obstacles to Indian national unity and integration are the vertical religio-communal cleavage between the Hindus and Muslims on the one hand and the horizontal cleavage between the caste-Hindus and the so-called scheduled castes and tribal Hindus on the other. Here also Tagore was one of the first to foresee these social hurdles to national unity and to forewarn his countrymen and their leaders; later, he gave his strong moral support to Gandhi in the latter's efforts to fight these evils. At the same time he was very much against the prevailing policy of bargaining at the political counter in the name of solving these evils. Political bargaining has brought about the partition of the country on religio-communal line, and this has created more problems, for the Hindus as well as for the Muslims, rather than solve any old ones.<sup>1</sup>

The truth is that Tagore's approach to the problem of national unity, as to all social and human problems, was moral and spiritual. He did not believe in achieving an end or winning a goal without paying the full price for it, without suffering and sacrifice, without the development of the inner powers as much of the individual as of the social aggregate. 'The idea that our country is ours merely because we have been born in it can only be held by those who are fastened, in a parasitic existence, upon the outside world. But the true nature of man is his inner nature, with his inherent powers. Therefore, that only can be a man's true country, which he

<sup>1</sup> In those fateful days, early in August, 1947, when Jawaharlal Nehru and Vallabhbhai Patel reluctantly argued with Gandhi that partition of the country, as Muhammad Ali Jinnah and Mountbatten wanted it, would at least be one permanent solution of the long-standing Hindu-Muslim problem, Gandhi is reported to have said: 'You say, it would solve the problem: I see'; then after a pause, 'it will be the beginning of the problem!' Had Tagore lived at that time, he would have uttered the same words, perhaps.



can help to create by his wisdom and will, his love and his actions. . . . For the act of creation itself is the realisation of truth.' Almost in the same breath he says: 'The refusal to pay the full price of a thing leads to the loss of the price without the gain of the thing. . . . the country must be the creation of all its people. . . . It must be the expression of all their forces of heart, mind and will.' Written in 1917, these words seem to have been prophetic indeed when we realise that, even after seventeen years of national independence, we are not yet socially integrated, not yet nationally unified, and have been paying the price to the extent we have failed to face the problem and solve it.

A liberal humanist orientation of Tagore's mind and imagination had made itself manifest very early in his life. When this mind and imagination he later applied to socio-political problems, the humanist note of his outlook and vision was all-pervasive. Even when he thought of India or of Hinduism, of Islam or of Christianity, he did so in the context of all humanity. 'So, in the evolving history of India', said he early in the first decade of this century, 'the principle at work is not the ultimate glorification of the Hindu, or any other race. In India, the history of humanity is seeking to elaborate a special ideal, to give to general perfection a special form which shall be for the gain of all humanity—nothing less than this is its end and aim . . .'<sup>1</sup> Even in those days of ardent patriotic fervour he was thinking in terms of contact and co-operation with other peoples, races and cultures. When, therefore, during the First World War he turned away from nationalism altogether, it slowly began to dawn on him that the salvation of India and of the jealous and hatred-ridden world lay in rearing up better understanding and closer collaboration among the various peoples and cultures, in building bridges between nations and races. Internationalism, he argued, was the only answer to the menace of nationalism as he saw and understood it. This was an answer that came very naturally to him, first, because it was in tune with what he thought to have been the traditional ideology of India (spirit of harmony as the basic law of life and universalism

<sup>1</sup> 'East and West in Greater India', in *Greater India*.

of the human spirit); secondly, because he believed that co-operation with and integration of diverse indigenous and foreign races, peoples and cultures were the lessons to be learnt from Indian history; and, thirdly, because he thought that India had no political destiny as such and that the basis of nationalism was wanting in India. He, therefore, came to hold that internationalism was the only means by which India could find herself and by doing so help others find themselves. As years rolled on, this internationalism became almost a passion with him to the extent that he came sincerely to hold that the nations of the world 'shall be saved together or drawn together into destruction', and that 'we must all be saved or we must perish together'. These words were uttered as early as in 1921, more than two decades before the nuclear age burst upon us!

It is important to notice that Tagore's internationalism was not just a political creed, or an institutional device for achieving specific political ends in a given international situation. Nor was it the fashionable cosmopolitanism of the sophisticated intellectual or the woolly universalism of the humanitarian pacifist. It was with Tagore a positive and activist spiritual concept that embraced the whole human race and which was based on certain natural and hence fundamental human rights. Exclusiveness or non-co-operation in any form, racial or religious, territorial or national, social, economic or cultural, had no place in his conception of internationalism. Aggressiveness in any form, in the name of national necessity or under the claim of racial, economic or cultural superiority, was regarded as immoral and anti-human. An unsparing critic of Western imperialism in Asia and Africa, he was equally unsparing in his criticism of Japan and her so-called Asian mission of 'co-prosperity'. His two classic letters to the Japanese poet, Yone Noguchi, illustrate his internationalist stand in eloquent terms, in the context of the Sino-Japanese conflict of that time. Internationalism was indeed a moral and spiritual concept with him, a concept which was the very basis of human civilisation. From 1911 onwards he was all the time thinking and acting in terms of 'the large humanity that makes us go across the barriers of political labels and divisions'. Later, as he acquired more and more intimate

knowledge of the contemporary social, political and economic problems that afflicted the world, he came to realise that a mere psychological approach to the solution of international problems was not enough; he came to hold that any such approach to be effective had to be reinforced by struggles for political freedom in the colonial societies, and rapid and large scale social and economic changes in the various regions of the world, especially in the backward areas. Social justice, economic security and political freedom must, he came eventually to recognise, be the main pillars to support any world edifice of international understanding and co-operation. It was at this stage, roughly from about 1926, but more pronouncedly from 1930, that political freedom for India, as for all colonial societies, became an integral feature of his ideas and outlook on internationalism; and nationalism everywhere, but especially in India, thus came to acquire, for him, an international outlook.

The corner stone of Tagore's internationalism was his undying faith in humanity. Despite frequent shocks and frustrations, despite unspeakable agony of lost hopes and aspirations, he never gave up this faith, though at times, towards the end of his long life, it was difficult for him to retain it. In his celebrated essay, *Sabhyatār Sankat* (Crisis in Civilisation, May 1941), the last one in this genre, written two months before his death, he reiterates this faith in words and cadence that defy translation in another language.

The wheels of Fate will some day compel the English to give up their Indian Empire. But what kind of India will they leave behind, what stark misery? When the stream of their two centuries' administration runs dry at last what a waste of mud and filth they will leave behind them! I had at one time believed that the springs of civilisation would issue out of the heart of Europe. But when I am about to quit the world that faith has gone bankrupt altogether.

Today I live in the hope that the Saviour is coming—that he will be born in our midst in this poverty-shamed hovel which is India. I shall wait to hear the divine message of civilisation which he will bring with him, the supreme word of promise that he will speak unto man from this very eastern horizon to give faith and strength to all who hear.



As I look around I see the crumbling ruins of a proud civilisation strewn like a vast heap of futility. And yet I shall not commit the grievous sin of losing faith in Man. I would rather look forward to the opening of a new chapter in his history after the cataclysm is over and the atmosphere rendered clean with the spirit of service and sacrifice. Perhaps that dawn will come from this horizon, from the East where the sun rises. A day will come when unvanquished Man will retrace his path of conquest, despite all barriers, to win back his lost human heritage.

## 4

Tagore's ideas and experiments in education had a purely personal origin. He had bitter memories of his early schooling, and when, towards the turn of the nineteenth century, he opened the *Brahmacharyāśrama* at Santiniketan, his main idea and motive were to spare his own children and those of his close friends the lifeless routine and mechanical boredom of school education that obtained in our country. 'I know', he said later, 'what it was to which the school owes its origin. It was no new theory of education, but the memory of school days.' He wanted to provide for his and his friends' children a residential environment in which nature would play a dominant role in their education, where formal teaching, with the help of books and other traditional materials, would be kept to the minimum, and where life would be disciplined along the lines of hermitage schools of the ancient and classical Indian system: simple but joyous, rigorous but spontaneously so, free but bound by the obligations of love and affection between the teacher and the taught, the latter being led by the examples set by the former. 'Children's subconscious mind is very active', he argued, 'and, like a tree, it has the power to gather food from the surrounding atmosphere. For them the atmosphere is a great deal more important than rules and methods, buildings and appliances, teaching in class and text-books.'

The institution grew up slowly but steadily, and children from various quarters began to be drawn in. Tagore used to teach them, play and sing with them, live with them; his colleagues also did the same, much as the sage-teachers

of ancient times are believed to have done in their *tapovanas* to pass on to their pupils 'their lessons of immortal life in the atmosphere of truth, peace and freedom of the spirit.' It was from these *tapovanas* that he derived the model and ideal of his *āśrama* school. These *tapovanas*, the poet believed, were 'neither schools, nor monasteries in the modern sense of the word.' The sage-teachers there 'lived outside society, yet they were to society what the sun is to the planets'. In ancient India, according to him, 'the school was there where was the life itself. There the students were brought up in the academic atmosphere of living aspiration.'

One must not forget that the foundation and early growth of this *āśrama* school synchronise roughly with the period of the poet's life that produced *Kathā* (Ballads, 1900), *Kāhinī* (Tales, 1900), *Kalpanā* (Dreams, 1900), *Naivedya* (Offering, 1901), *Kheyā* (The Ferry, 1906), *Śārodatsav* (The Autumn Festival, 1908) and *Gorā* (1901), among others, when his mind and imagination were held all but captive in the classical ideas and ideals of ancient India. It is no wonder, therefore, that in the ideas and ideals of his *āśrama* school he would hark back to the ancient Indian ideals of life and education, and try to interpret them as best as he could in terms of contemporary experience. The beginning was indeed very modest; but as years rolled on, with increasing experience and experimentation, he came to be regarded as one of our leading pedagogues, and he formulated his ideas on education as well as his ideals of the *āśrama* school.

It must be an *asrama* where men have gathered for the highest end of life, in the peace of nature; where life is not merely meditative, but fully awake in its activities; where boys' minds are not being perpetually drilled into believing that the ideal of self-idolatry of the nation is the truest ideal for them to accept; where the sunrise and sunset and the silent glory of stars are not daily ignored; where nature's festivities of flowers and fruits have their joyous recognition from men; and where the young and the old, the teacher and the student, sit at the same table to partake of their daily food and the food of their eternal life.

A classic *tapovana* setting in which nature had its full play

and where children could live and grow in joyous freedom and harmony with her was, thus, an essential prerequisite of the type of residential school he had in view and which he tried to rear up. Secondly, the teachers and students were required to live a common life based on simplicity, self-help and self-imposed discipline; and, thirdly, the disciplines of the meditative life, that is, of inner spiritual life, and the disciplines of the active life were to be regarded and imbibed as complementary disciplines.

Admittedly Tagore did not start with any theory of child or adult education. But the memory of his school days, his personal experience as a teacher and his experiments with children at Santiniketan led him, steadily and surely, to the formulation of certain ideas which, through the years, seem to have flowed into our educational thinking. First, the human child must be allowed to grow up in natural environments to enable it to imbibe, unconsciously, its essential oneness and harmony with nature. Secondly, the nourishment and discipline of its senses and emotions must be considered as important as, if not more than, those of its body and mind. Love and sympathy, music and dance, fairs and festivals, open air plays, etc. were the means by which this nourishment and discipline could be achieved. The young spirit must be so trained that he may be able to sense beauty and harmony, that he may feel that he belongs to a human world which is in harmonious tune with the world around it.

Thirdly, Tagore did not have much faith in educating children formally. He believed in creating around the child an environment of culture and refinement and then let it develop its personality, subconsciously and happily, by imbibing the cultured and refined atmosphere; for it is through this subconscious process that a child naturally learns most effectively.

Fourthly, from his childhood experiences he realised the importance of regarding children as growing human beings, and give them every encouragement and opportunity to grow up, and not to isolate them more than is absolutely necessary from the world of the grown-ups, particularly from the adult literature and arts.



The watery stuff into which literary nectar is now diluted for being served up to the young takes full account of their childishness, but none of them as growing human beings. Children's books should be such as can partly be understood by them and partly not. In our childhood we read every available book from one end to the other; and both what we understood, and what we did not, went on working within us. That is how the world itself reacts on the child consciousness. The child makes its own what it understands, while that which is beyond leads it on a step forward.<sup>1</sup>

Fifthly, he came to believe, again from personal experience, that education to be creative and spontaneous must be conducted in the child's mother tongue.

It was because we were taught in our own language that our minds quickened. Learning should as far as possible follow the process of eating. When the taste begins from the first bite, the stomach is awakened to its function before it is loaded, so that its digestive juices get full play. Nothing like this happens, however, when the Bengali boy is taught in English. ... While one is choking and spluttering over the spelling and grammar, the inside remains starved, and when at length the taste is felt, the appetite has vanished. If the whole mind does not work from the beginning its full powers remain underdeveloped to the end.<sup>2</sup>

The importance of imparting education at all stages in one's mother-tongue, particularly at the primary and secondary stages, is a recurrent theme of many of his essays on education. In *Śikshār Bāhan* (Vehicle of Education, 1916), writing in the context of the contemporary culture of Japan, he said:

Whatever the West has to offer, Japan has already made her own; the main reason is that western learning has been made available to her people in her own language.... Must the Bengali boy go on paying the penalty because his mother tongue is Bengali? ... Needless to say, we must learn English, French and, better still, German. At the same time, it must be recognised that most Bengali boys will never learn English. How can we

<sup>1</sup> *My Reminiscences*, pp. 111-12.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 58-59.

acquiesce in the idea that for this reason millions of these boys must remain on a starvation or semi-starvation diet.<sup>1</sup>

And, finally, he held that education to be effective must be related with concrete life.

Education should not be dragged out of its native element, the life-current of the people. Economic life covers the whole width of the fundamental basis of society, because its necessities are the simplest and the most universal. Educational institutions, in order to obtain their fulness of truth, must have close association with economic life ... Our centre of culture should not only be the centre of the intellectual life of India, but the centre of economic life also. ...

He pronounced himself very strongly against the teaching of history, geography and the social and natural sciences exclusively from the printed word. Learning is never real, never becomes a part of one's being, he argued, unless it is co-related with life's concrete experiences. He sought to put his ideas on this matter into practice in his own school. In a letter from Russia he wrote:

Kalimohan [Ghosh] has done a certain amount of similar work in the neighbourhood of Santiniketan, but to little effect, as our students and teachers were not connected with it. To prepare the mind for enquiry is not less important than to reap its fruit. I heard that Prabhat [Kumar Mukhopadhyay] had with the students of the Economics Department of the College laid the foundations of such studies, but this must be done more generally; the boys of School Department too must be initiated into this work and a museum of provincial exhibits established.<sup>2</sup>

During his Russian sojourn this aspect of Soviet education attracted his attention and he found in it a strong support of his own ideas.

Regional study extends all over Russia. ... Past history and past and present economic conditions are studied at the respective

<sup>1</sup> Translation by Sasadhar Sinha, in *Social Thinking of Rabindranath Tagore*.

<sup>2</sup> *Letters from Russia*, p. 56.

local centres; the productivity of soils analysed and minerals searched. The spread of education by means of museums attached to these centres is a very heavy responsibility. The widespread regional study and the museums connected with it are some of the chief means of progress in the new era of education that has been initiated in the Soviet State.<sup>1</sup>

These were some of his basic ideas that he himself, with the help of his younger colleagues, tried to put into practice in his *āśrama* school. Whenever he happened to stay at Santiniketan, he took classes of small children as well as of boys and girls; he sang and played with them, rehearsed and acted and danced with them. Brilliant are the few model textbooks, the Bengali, English and Science primers, that he wrote for them, and the question papers that he set for them can serve, even today, as models. Those of us who had at one time or another the privilege and opportunity of attending his talks and lectures, bear testimony to his brilliant teaching which made us feel and know how class teaching could be the work of a creative artist.

Within a decade of his founding the Santiniketan *āśrama* school, the partition of Bengal and of the Bengali speaking people generated a political movement of intense power and magnitude. The educated middle-class came to realise that the English schools and colleges were the main agencies through which the alien ruling authority held the minds of the people in its grip. Therefore such schools and colleges were sought to be boycotted and replaced by 'national' institutions. Thus, for the first time in India, the mode of imparting education became a point of contest, a national issue, around which a movement grew, and the ardent nationalist that Tagore was during this decade, took up the issue, became one of the leaders of the movement, and assumed the task of formulating the fundamental principles of national education as he conceived it, and chalked out a programme for its attainment. What was thus Tagore's personal ideas and educational experiments in a small ideal island at Santiniketan came to be projected on to the national plane. He had started thinking in terms of the growth of the individual child, boy and girl; now he started thinking

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 55-56.



of education with reference to larger social needs and aspirations, as an organic product of society intimately connected with its manifold activities. National education must, he held, have its roots in national life.

He started by turning the face of the movement from one of negative protest to one of positive creative activity. National education, he warned his countrymen, must not be an imitation of the English system of education that obtained in our country. 'We should not entertain the idea for a moment that we have undertaken this task against the British Government. The truth is that in the heart of the country there is somewhere a real feeling of want; the country hungers for something to be done and we are here to do it.' He wanted to do it, first, by projecting on the national plane his general ideas on education, and, secondly, by a critical analysis of the means, methods and ideals of the existing systems of education and replacing them by a new set of values. The following quotations from some of his writings on education, chosen at random, will make the working of his mind clear.

On the point of making education an integral part of society he says in one of his essays, *Sikshā-samasyā* (Problems of our Education, 1906) :

Where the school is not at one with the entire social life, where it is an imposition on society, it is dry and lifeless. What we learn from it is learnt with difficulty; and when the time comes for its application we cannot use it adequately. We learn our lessons by rote; they have no relation to the people around us, no relevance to life. Our school learning finds no echo at home or among friends; on the contrary, it is often looked upon with hostility. In such circumstances, the school is only a machine, a manufactory of matter without life.<sup>1</sup>

He was deeply impressed by the intimate relation of education with life in the system of education in Soviet Russia.

The cultivation of the land advances with the cultivation of the mind in Russia. Here education is living. I have always insisted that education must be reconciled with life. Separated

<sup>1</sup> Translation by Sasadhar Sinha, in *Social Thinking of Rabindranath Tagore*, *op. cit.*

from it, it belongs to the larder, but does not become food for the digestive organs.

There I found education has become vital, because the boundary of the school does not divide it from daily life. They do not teach in order to prepare pupils for examinations or to produce scholars, but to make all-round men. We have schools in our country, but the mind is greater than education, vigour greater than information; under the weight of the printed word, no energy is left in us to make use of our minds. How often have I tried to draw our boys into discussion, but found that they had nothing to ask. The link between the desire to know and knowledge itself has been severed in them. They have never learnt to want to know; from the very beginning information is being constantly doled out to them in a cut and dried fashion and they collect marks in the examination by repeating what they have been taught.<sup>1</sup>

In another essay, *Sikshār Herpher* (Vicissitudes of Education, 1893), written at the height of our national education movement, he says in respect of our higher education:

As we read we do not think, with the result that while we are piling up a heap of matter, we are not creating anything. Brick and mortar, joists and beams, lime and sand rise sky-high; and all of a sudden the University ordains that an extra floor must be built. At once we climb over this mountaneous pile and for two whole years apply ourselves to beating down on it a plane surface; it assumes the appearance of a floor. But can it all be called a building? Can light and air find their way into it? Is it possible for man to find a habitable life-long refuge in it? Can it protect him from the inclemencies of the outer world? Where can one find order, beauty and harmony in it?<sup>2</sup>

But more than anything else, he came to look upon education and knowledge as the best and highest means for national integration and international understanding. 'Knowledge,' he argued, 'is the greatest factor of unity among human beings. . . Through knowledge one becomes conscious of human unity, which transcends difference of time and space. Leaving aside its utility, no one should be deprived of the joy that issues

<sup>1</sup> *Letters from Russia*, pp. 41-2.

<sup>2</sup> Translation by Sasadhar Sinha, in *Social Thinking of Rabindranath Tagore*, op. cit.

from the consciousness of this unity.' Indeed, education directed towards the development of consciousness of human unity and achievement of international understanding, particularly between the East and the West, came to occupy a great deal of his educational and cultural thinking even when he was in the midst of the movement for the establishment of a national system of education in the country. He reasoned that our unhappy political and economic relations with Great Britain had led to a bitter misunderstanding between us, representing the East, and the English or the French or the Dutch or the German, representing the West, and had hence clouded the vision of both in respect of the other. The nature of misunderstanding was such as could not be resolved in the fields of politics and economics, since these were areas infested with clashes of conflicting interests. He, therefore, argued that our educational centres must provide for knowledge and mutual understanding and appreciation of the best cultures of the East and West, for that alone could build up a secure base for international understanding and human fellowship.

In the meanwhile, the tragedy and devastation of the First World War convinced him, as they did so many other thinkers all the world over, that an improvement in international understanding was absolutely necessary. What was still nebulous in his mind began slowly to take shape; and out of a sort of emotional thinking on the individual and national plane, he emerged steadily but surely to a clearer understanding on the international plane. He became more and more convinced that a better and more effective international understanding could be achieved, so far as India was concerned, by a wholesale transformation alone of the ideals and character of our centres of learning, which were still weak and poor imitations of those of the West. The transformations he visualized would make these centres of learning active and vigorous, focussing the cultures of Asia in general and that of India in particular on the one hand, and reflecting and fostering the cultures of all other peoples of the world on the other. It was only through such transformations that the universities and other centres of learning in India, he argued, could become real seats of international learning and effective meeting grounds of the East and the West.



The Visva-Bharati at Santiniketan grew out of such conception—a natural transformation, through stages, of his original *brahmacharyāśrama* school to a great centre of international learning where India was to confront the world and the world India in a joint creative effort for achieving the unity of mankind.

My own aspiration for my own country is that the mind of India should join its forces to the great movement of mind which is in the present-day world. Every success that we may attain in this effort will at once lead us directly to the unity of Man. Where the League of Nations acknowledges this unity, or not, it is the same to us. We have to realise it through our own creative mind. The moment we take part in the building up of civilisation we are instantly released from our self-seclusion, from our mental solitary cell.

"*Viśva-bhāratī* represents India where she has her wealth of mind which is for all. *Viśva-bhāratī* acknowledges India's obligation to offer to others the hospitality of her best culture and India's right to accept from others their best."

## 16. An Image of the Artist

THE first available photograph (1873-74) of Tagore shows him as a young lad of twelve (this was after his return from Dalhousie in the Panjab Himalayas where he had sojourned with his father for about four months), taller than an average Bengali boy of his age, with long arms and long, tapering fingers, well-defined features, an oval face with a pointed chin, a high and broad forehead and a dolichocephalic head covered with heavy shocks of hair curling at the hanging ends. But the most remarkable feature of the face is a pair of deep-set, dark, penetrating eyes, shaped, as our traditional poetic image would have it, like the petals of a lotus flower, and a sharp, high and pointed nose that hovers over a pair of thin, well-shaped lips. Another photograph, taken about a couple of years later (1875-76), presents the face in more precise, clearly defined outlines that shape, among other things, a determined chin. Meanwhile the nose has grown sharper, the eyes darker, deeper and more penetrating, the lips firmer and the features altogether more regular, and the long hair, hanging on the broad shoulders, denser, and more curly. Eight years later, in 1883, at the time of his marriage, he is a handsome young man of twenty-two—tall, straight, sturdy, dignified and conscious of himself. He has grown a moustache in the meantime and has learnt to dress his heavy and long locks in curly curves, covering the sides of his high and broad forehead. In another five years he begins to grow a beard, and for the rest of his life he never allows himself to be shaved, though twice he was sheared somewhat closely: once after the death of his father as was the custom, and for a second time, in his seventy-eighth year, for the erysipelas operation. Of the years of mature youth, we have a number of photographs to bear testimony to his tall, erect, well-built, disciplined and dignified form with a massive head covered with long, heavy and well-dressed curly locks of black hair, a delicately chiselled oval face bordered by well-groomed beard, equally black; a shapely, sharp nose and a pair of dark pupils intently staring out of the limpid

depths of the eyes.

By 1912, when he received the Nobel Prize, his hair and beard had started thinning somewhat and growing grey slowly. But the tall, stately and sturdy frame, with the well-groomed silken beard flowing down the chest, had by now acquired a dignity that was to stay with him for the rest of his life. His carriage had become a study in poise and dignity, his manner of sitting reposeful, relaxed and royal, and his eyes had meanwhile come to wear a detached, inward look. This was the physical image of the poet when he emerged from the low-lying plains of Bengal on to the stage of the wide world. For another decade or so, despite his increasingly thinning and greying hair and subtle aging of the facial muscles, despite the faint suggestions of the half circles below the eyes and the lines on the forehead, his figure retained the poise and dignity of his mature youth, while his eyes developed, more and more, a penetrating inwardness of vision, detached and withdrawn even in the midst of tumultuous ovations from a multitude as among admiring individuals and small groups in a drawing room. This perhaps explains why, during his European tour in 1926, especially in Germany and certain northern countries of Europe, his physical image, apart from his message, came to be invested with an aura which the Westerners had learned to associate with their saints and messiahs of the Hebrew-Christian tradition. In India, too, especially in Bengal, by this time, if not from some time earlier still, this physical image set against the backdrop of his *āśrama* at Santiniketan where he was called *Gurudeva*, his religious sermons, his aristocratic bearing and his wide learning and deep wisdom had earned him the glow and halo of the traditional Upanishadic seer.

By 1930, when he visited the Soviet lands, his hair and his flowing beard had grown more silken and turned altogether silvery white; the look of his eyes and the expression of his facial contours had become more tender, as if melting with compassion; and the lines and creases of his forehead and the facial muscles deeper and more pronounced, reflecting as much the effects of age as the afflictions of humanity. But what was by then more sadly evident was a definite stoop of his robust and majestic frame. His gait and movement had still the poise and dignity of his younger days, but they had inevitably



become slow. As years rolled on the slowly increasing, graceful curve of the back began to turn acute till he could no longer walk with ease for any distance, yet he would not take the help of a stick or of any person. For the last four years of his life his movements had to be very much restricted. But almost unto the last his fair skin retained its sheen and radiance, the muscles and nerves their sensitive plasticity, and the eyes their dark, deep but mellow glow.

His tall and sturdy frame was, of course, partly inherited, but it was also largely the result of the measured physical exercise that he regularly took for the better part of his life. The pre-dawn, east-facing, sitting-still position of *padmāsana* in an attitude of prayer, with regulated breath, that he kept up till the last days of his life should perhaps be taken as part of such exercise. His aristocratic mien also was as much a part of his family tradition and up-bringing as of the intellectual and spiritual individuality that he cultivated. The sheen and radiance of his skin, the silken softness of his hair and beard, the plasticity of his muscles, the placidity of his nerves, and the refinement of his senses were all consciously achieved through an unceasing process of culturing them. What nature had given him he improved upon by constant effort, keeping in view not only the need and build of his physical frame but also the demands of his inner self, of his vision and imagination, in other words, the demands of his person. It was indeed the creating of an object of art, out of the raw material of the body physical.

His dress and dietary habits also formed an integral part of the image roughly sketched above. These habits were not austere by any standard, nor even modest; indeed he loved good, tasty and savoury food and soft but delicious drinks. Who in Bengal does not know of his fondness for mangoes! But at the same time all such habits were measured and well-regulated, and this throughout his life. Yet whenever he considered it necessary to restore the balance of his system he would not only deny himself the pleasures of the palate but would willingly suffer the taste of the bitterest of food or drink without even the slightest twitch of his facial muscles. Here, too, he went by the laws of harmony and balance that, according to him, sustained nature. Him they sustained at any

rate, since we know from his biography that, except for the last four years of his life he hardly ever suffered from any illness worth mentioning. His sturdy frame, although frequently subjected to severe strains, physical as well as mental, was ever kept on an even keel by disciplined exercise of his body, his senses and emotions, his mental faculties, and by the regulated and balanced habits of food and drink.

His dress, too, which he himself evolved, was very personal, with an individuality of its own, that suited the demands of his physical frame and was satisfying to his aesthetic and spiritual sensibilities. The informal male dress in the Tagore house consisted usually of the wide and loose *kurtā* and *pyjāmā* of white cotton, a legacy of the late Muslim tradition of upper India, and this was also, naturally, Tagore's usual informal dress, though later in life he seemed to have preferred, occasionally at least, silk to cotton. The traditional upper- and middle-class formal Bengali dress, consisting of the long and flowing *dhuti* and *kurtā* (curiously called *pāñjābī* in Bengal) and *chādar* or *shāl*, he used, only occasionally, for social, cultural, and religious functions, that is, for ceremonial purposes mainly. In his formative years and early youth he, like many others of the class and tradition he belonged to, used to don a formal dress which seems to have been the legacy of the princely and formal tradition of India of the late eighteenth century. But as he reached his manhood he started evolving a formal dress of his own and, by the time he was fifty, this dress had become standardized for the rest of his life. When anywhere in India, this consisted of the informal, wide and loose, white cotton or cream-coloured silk *kurtā-pyjāmā*, but, when abroad, the *pyjāmā* was substituted by a pair of trousers or trousers-like loose wear, and the *kurtā* by a long and loose jacket with fasteners at the sides, both of warmer and heavier material. But the most distinctive item was a loose, *kimono*-like overall, open at the front and hanging in graceful folds from the shoulders to almost the ankles, the material being lighter or heavier and warmer according to the climate. He was so fond of this dress, which was presumably adapted from the overall of the Tibetan Lamas, that in his advanced years, even when he was at home at Santiniketan or in Calcutta, it was his usual wear for both formal and informal occasions; in the

summer months the loose cotton *pyjāmā* was occasionally replaced by a silk *lungi*, but the overall was a constant factor.

The whole point of this rather drab and long description is that Tagore's dress was neither typically and traditionally Indian, except for the *kurtā-pyjāmā* or *dhuti-pāñjābī-chādar*, nor European, except when he was in Europe in his early years, and that he had always a preference for long, loose and flowing dress-forms, irrespective of whether they were adaptations from traditional forms or he himself had evolved them. He knew what his figure was like and whatever dress he chose for himself was designed to emphasize and bring out the stateliness of his physical form and the aristocratic manner of his mien. The style of his long and loose dress and the long cap that he occasionally used while abroad were designed as much in keeping with his physical frame as with the demands of his inner self, which means that in the matter of dress as well, he sought to cultivate his personality. In other words, dress with him was an object of art directed towards self-expression.

## 2

If in his conscious and continuous cultivation of personality, balance, rhythm, harmony, proportion, etc.—collectively called *chhandas* in Indian terminology—were what chiefly inspired and guided him, in the matter of the externals of life, this was more so with regard to his senses and sensibilities, his mind and spirit. I have already tried to give an account elsewhere in this book as to how he carried on this process of cultivation in the context of the time and the situations in which he found himself, and no repetition of that account by way of summarization is called for. Attempt has also been made to bring out the values, both relative and absolute, that were from time to time evolved, modified and replaced, as and when necessary, in the course, and as an outcome, of the process. Then, I have also tried to show how this process and the values were related to the relevant objective situations and how his being-becoming was constantly being conditioned and formed as much by the process itself as by the values.

There is, of course, bound to be differences of opinion as



to how far this process is valid and how sound are these values. But one should bear in mind that what Tagore strove for constantly was the cultivation of his person, and that in such a manner as to make his life an object of art and at the same time make art-objects out of the experiences of that life itself. Therefore, to be fair, such questions should be judged by referring to the objective he had in view: How far were goodness and greatness reflected in his life itself, considered as an object of art, as also in the objects of art themselves that originated in, and were formed by, that life? Considerable material of some significance has been laid out in the foregoing chapters to enable the reader to form his own judgement. My object, therefore, in the following lines will be just to explain briefly the fundamental process pursued by Tagore for the cultivation of his self, since the process itself, it will be recognised, was responsible for the formation of most of the values that Tagore cherished.

Tagore was born and brought up in a family which was protestant in social and religious matters, protestant from the point of view of contemporary Brahmanical Hinduism and Hindu social ideology. But one should remember that this protestantism was, both in attitude and practice, deeply tinged, because of social and historical reasons, with the broad humanistic liberalism of the ancient and medieval Indian and the nineteenth century European tradition. It, therefore, had no sharp edges, and it never could assume an exclusive and aggressive posture. The family also belonged to the social order of the contemporary landed aristocracy; but, because of its affiliation, on the one hand, to the religious and spiritual ideology of the *Upanishads*, to the social tenets of the nineteenth century humanist thought, and to the cultural refinement of Indian classical and the late-medieval landed aristocracy, and, on the other, to the intellectual aristocracy of ancient India, the family succeeded not only in avoiding the contamination of the gross vulgarity that characterised the contemporary landed aristocracy of Bengal but also in steering clear of the crudity and parvenuism of the *nouveau riche* that had already pervaded the colonial and commercial Calcutta of the nineteenth century.

This was not at all an easy achievement, but the result of

hard work according to the dictates springing from a clear vision. There were pulls and pressures from various directions; those from orthodoxy and tradition on the one hand, and the challenges thrown up by the demands of the age on the other. Then, there was the very complex question as to what parts or aspects of our tradition and the demands of the age to be retained and fostered and what to be rejected and fought against. The poet's father, Devendranath Tagore, who was deeply involved in the intellectual and spiritual conflicts of the Bengali élite of Calcutta of the thirties to the sixties and seventies of the nineteenth century, saw, as many had done before him, that what was of supreme importance in those difficult times was to achieve some balance and harmony out of the contending and conflicting pulls and pressures of various forces.

Fortunately for Tagore he was brought up in the spiritual and intellectual environment of a time when the intellectual élite of Bengal, which was the dominant minority, was engaged in trying desperately to work out a creative and constructive synthesis of the contending and conflicting values and practices then prevailing. But in no other circle were experiments in such a synthesis carried out with such poise and calmness of spirit, with such rhythmic and graceful way of living as in the crowded and sprawling, but noiseless, house of Devendranath Tagore. It was in this house that, as a boy and in his adolescence Rabindranath, shy, quiet and sensitive, came to imbibe and learn, perhaps unconsciously at first, the basic principle of life and the process of its practical operation, and, once learnt, they were never forgotten or left aside for the rest of his life. Slowly, steadily, but surely he came to discover for himself that *chhandas* was the basic principle that underlay as much the culturing of one's self (*ātma-saṁskāra*) as the making of art objects out of the experiences of that cultured self.

The term *chhandas* connotes the idea of proportion, balance, harmony, cadence, rhythm, etc., but also perhaps emotional sensitivity and grace. To be able to put this principle of *chhandas* into most effective operation in one's life, one has to cultivate, unceasingly, one's senses and sensibilities, mind and spirit in the light and in terms of this principle. And this is what Tagore sought to do throughout his adult life. The mode

and manner of self-culture of his early and mature youth, brief references to which have been made earlier in this book, afford ample evidence of this fact. But I shall try to illustrate this point by referring to certain situations of significance in his life and by noting his reactions and responses to them, so that we may understand as much the nature of operation of the process as the culturing of his senses and sensibilities, his mind and spirit.

Early in his youth Tagore came to experience love, a deep and passionate attachment to a young woman, of a kind that he had never experienced before nor was he to experience again. Later in life, too, he may have had minor love experiences, but what is relevant in the present context is that never in his personal life, nor in his creative writings, did he ever allow himself or his creatures to have the unique and absorbing experience of surging emotions, tense nerves and violent passions. Not that he did not know of them, imaginatively and intellectually at any rate (one has only to refer to the cave-scene in the novel *Chaturanga* and to the general tenor of his later novels and dramas), but he chose to discipline himself in a manner so as not to be disturbed by them. He learnt to transmute his love, his emotions and passions by a conscious process of disciplining his senses and sensibilities,—a transmutation which was very much different from what is popularly understood by 'Platonic love' or from the nineteenth century romanticists' idea of love. This transmutation in him resulted from his attaining a way of life with which violent emotions and tensions did not accord, for they disturbed the basic *chhandas* or rhythm of life and nature, the maintainance of which was of fundamental importance in this way of life.

His attitude towards anger and hate, pain and suffering was the same, and in keeping with this way of life. In his private and public life he came across, again and again, persons whose values and convictions were utterly different from his own; he found himself, repeatedly, in situations in which there was absolutely no respect for the ideals and values he cherished. Being a highly sensitive person he could not but have experienced, in such circumstances, the white heat of anger and the dark venom of hate. All this must have disturbed him



profoundly. But he is not recorded to have ever been overcome by hate or anger; rarely, if ever, did he give vent to them. Rather he sought to bring them under control by imposing upon himself rigorous self-discipline of a kind that enabled him to transmute them into creative expressions—examples of which are abundant in his poems and essays. Pain and suffering are undeniable and unavoidable facts of life and Tagore had more than his full share of them as any biographer of his would testify. His attitude to them was not stoic in any sense; indeed, to consider it so would be to miss the point altogether. Rather he accepted them when he was obliged to, and experienced them through every fibre of his being. He never ran away from them; but neither did he allow them to run away with him. Numerous are the instances where one finds him going through pain and suffering with patience and dignity, with poise and grace, and from and through every such trial of hate and anger, pain and suffering he emerged a nobler person, as if these provided him with the tools and techniques for the formation of his personality. This formation was as much a physical and intellectual undertaking as spiritual in terms of *chhandas*.

The 1907 episode of his sudden and unexpected withdrawal from the *Swadeshi* movement and his retirement at Santiniketan afford an example of another kind of discipline he enjoined upon himself. We know today that for various reasons the movement was being swayed by hatred and intolerance, and was fast turning violent and aggressive, which for Tagore meant that it was losing its balance and proportion, its rhythm and grace, and this deeply hurt his sensibilities. The retreat at Santiniketan and the writing of the poems in *Kheyā* constitute just an attempt to regain and restore the balance and proportion, the rhythm and grace of his personal self. Of similar significance were the Jallianwalla Bagh episode of 1919 and the fast moving events of 1936-41. On both occasions his senses and sensibilities were terribly hurt and enraged; indeed he felt disturbed beyond measure, and then, as before, he drew himself all within and let all these pass through the by now well-practised process of emotional and intellectual discipline before he was in a position to transmute them into creative works. These are but only a few of the many instances

where one sees how it was that the same process was in operation as much in his life as in his art.

Early in his youth, he was faced, on the one hand, with the other-worldly outlook on life with its asceticism and renunciation, and, on the other, with the utterly this-worldly life of pleasure and enjoyment, of power and profit. The choice, for him, between these two ways seems to have been made very readily and without any hesitation. Neither of the ways was for him to follow, for they represented extreme positions at any given point of life. He, therefore, chose to follow a middle course and to work out a synthesis of the apparently irreconcilable positions much in the same way as, perhaps, a few at least of the seers of the *Upanishads* and a few more of the medieval Indian saint-poets and poet-saints had done before. The synthesis embraced the fullest acceptance of this world with all its implications as real and meaningful; it also embraced active and purposeful living in the very heart of it, but with all this there is a pervading sense of other-worldly renunciation, a spirit of detachment or rather non-attachment. For, it is only by being somewhat detached or non-attached that one can remain free from the coarseness of pleasure and enjoyment, free from the vulgarity of power and profit, and, at the same time, cultivate the art of good, gracious and graceful living as Tagore sought to do. What the extremes had to offer was not ruled out at all but they were all sought to be gathered unto the centre, and in the process their sharp edges and acute angles were smoothened out and rounded off. Here, too, Tagore's aim was to strike a balance between the opposite extremes, to work out a blend of their right proportions, to find out harmony and rhythm in actual day-to-day living and impart to it a refined tone and grace. This was his art in life out of which was spun out the texture of his vast complex of art-creations.

Here is, thus, the image of a man who participates fully in the drama of life, takes his full share of the pain and pleasures, of happiness and suffering that life has to offer; he is also affected by hate and anger, experiences love and its consequences. This, I believe, explains the colourfulness of his personality and the variety of his creations. But, unlike ordinary people, he is not swept off his feet by such emotions and feelings; and he never allows them to cloud the vision of his central object in life. When

he feels shaken and disturbed, he tries to regain his balance by drawing all such conflicts and discords, pain and sufferings—all the irreconcilable opposites—within himself. By using them all to discipline his senses and sensibilities, his mind and spirit, he builds up his person and eventually transmutes them all, through *chhandas*, into forms of creative expression. This is what characterises as much the personality of Tagore as his work as an artist.

If I have tried above to sketch an image of the artist who, to my mind, reared himself up and measured his steps along the corridor of life on the principle of *chhandas*, I should warn my readers that this principle must not be looked upon as one of tedious and soulless abstraction, nor interpreted as a metaphysical concept which was sought to be put into operation in life and art. In one of our initial chapters (pages 9-11) I stated that, instead of trying to reduce Tagore's personality and art to the doubtful process of a simplified unity, we should search for some perspective which would include the various depths and dimensions of his personality and the variety, vitality and versatility of his art. We set ourselves also the task of arriving, by studying and exploring his life and art, item by item, stage by stage, aspect by aspect, at the knowledge of the inner law or laws, according to which his personality and art evolved. The principle and practice of *chhandas*, I believe, provide this perspective; at the same time it also seems to furnish an inner law according to our interpretation of the poet's life and art.

*Chhandas* presupposes all kinds and levels of tensions and turmoils; indeed, these are inherent in life as much as in art, and the passage through tensions and turmoils releases forces that lend charm and colour and variety and vitality to life and art. These are, therefore, as important as the resolution of the tensions and turmoils, and organising them in terms of *chhandas*. The comprehensiveness and versatility of Tagore's mind, the range of his creative faculties and the abundance of his creative output are to be comprehended, to my mind, from this point of view. They show the imprints of whatever tensions and turmoils the poet had been through as well as the process and the results of his resolving them. Abundant material has gone into the making of this book to show that his personality and art evolved naturally, and that there is in this evolution an over-riding,



almost elemental, unity of organic nature. We have also tried to show that there is a deep underlying harmony in the course of this evolution. This unity and harmony seem to stem from his understanding of, and adherence to, the principle of *chhandas*.

It will be wrong to assume that this principle of *chhandas*, of which I have tried to give an idea, has universal application. All that can be said of it is that in the case of Tagore this principle served him fully and well, and that it is more than clear that Tagore achieved his greatness, in his personal life as well as in his art, through a general application and quest of this principle. The quest was purely a personal one, but the results achieved were of great significance socially and historically—for his age and clime at any rate.



## Works of Rabindranath Tagore

### A Bibliography

In preparing this select bibliography, we have omitted pamphlets, especially those which consist of an essay or a lecture, excepting *Subhyatar Samkat*, the poet's last message on completing eighty years of his life, and its English version, *Crisis in Civilization*. So far as Bengali is concerned, most of these essays and addresses occurring in pamphlets have since been collected in some book or other mentioned in this bibliography. A list of lectures and addresses and other pamphlets in English prepared by one of the present compilers, will be found in *The Visva-Bharati Quarterly*, Spring, 1958.

We have also omitted books of music (notations), the new series of which runs to fifty-nine volumes, published till now, under the title *Svaravitan*, and text-books and readers, over a dozen in number. Most of the new poems and some of the essays and stories written for or first included in these text-books and readers have since been collected in other books enumerated in this bibliography.

With regard to the correct order of publication of English books issued during a year, many of which were published abroad, there is scope for further inquiry and improvement.

Although in the text and index of this book diacritic marks have been used where necessary, they have not been used in this bibliography.

#### BENGALI

##### SEPARATE WORKS

- KAVI-KAHINI (1878). *Verse*  
BANA-PHUL (1880). *Verse*  
VALMIKI PRATIBHA (1881). *Musical Drama*  
BHAGNAHRIDAY (1881). *Drama, in verse*  
RUDRAGHANDA (1881). *Drama, in verse*  
EUROPE-PRAYASIR PATRA (1881). *Letters*  
SANDHYA SANGIT (1882). *Verse*  
KAL-MRIGAYA (1882). *Musical Drama*  
BAU-THAKURANTR HAT (1883). *Novel*  
PRABHAT SANGIT (1883). *Verse*



- VIVIDHA PRASANGA (1883). *Essays*  
 CHHABI O GAN (1884). *Verse*  
 PRAKRUITHI PRATISODHI (1884). *Drama*  
 NALINI (1884). *Drama*  
 SAISAV SANGIT (1884). *Verse*  
 BHANUSIMHA THAKURER PADAVALI (1884). *Songs*  
 ALOCHANA (1885). *Essays*  
 RABICHCHHAYA (1885). *Songs*  
 KADI O KOMAL (1886). *Verse*  
 RAJARSHI (1887). *Novel*  
 CHITHIPATRA (1887). *Essays*  
 SAMALLOCHANA (1888). *Essays*  
 MAYAR KHELA (1888). *Musical Drama*  
 RAJA O RANI (1889). *Drama, in verse*  
 VISARJAN (1890). *Drama, in verse*  
 MANASI (1890). *Verse*  
 EUROPE-YATRI DIARY (Part I 1891; Part II 1893). *Travel*  
 CHITRANGADA (1892). *Drama, in verse*  
 GODAY GALAD (1892). *Comedy*  
 SONAR TARI (1894). *Verse*  
 CHHOTA GALPA (1894). *Short Stories*  
 VIDAY-ABHISAP (1894). *Drama, in verse*  
     First published with the second edition of *Chitrangada*  
     under the title *Chitrangada o Viday-Abhisap* (1894).  
 VICHITRA GALPA, Parts I and II (1894). *Short Stories*  
 KATHA-CHATUSHTAY (1894). *Short Stories*  
 GALPA-DASAK (1895). *Short Stories*  
 NADI (1896). *Verse*  
 CHITRA (1896). *Verse*  
 MALINI (1896). *Drama, in verse*  
     First published in *Kavya Granthavali* (1896).  
 CHAITALI (1896). *Verse*  
     First published in *Kavya Granthavali* (1896).  
 VAIKUNTHAR KHATA (1897). *Comedy*  
 PANCHABHUT (1897). *Essays*  
 KANIKI (1899). *Verse*  
 KATHA (1900). *Verse*  
     *Katha o Kahini*, that is, *Katha* with additional poems from  
     other books, is the version now current.  
 KAHINI (1900). *Verse-Drama, and Verse*  
 KALPANA (1900). *Verse*  
 KSHANIKI (1900). *Verse*  
 NAIVEDYA (1901). *Verse*

CHOKHER BALI (1903). *Novel*

SMARAN (1903). *Verse*

First published in *Kavya-Grantha* (1903-4).

SISU (1903). *Verse*

First published in *Kavya-Grantha* (1903-4).

KARMAPHAL (1903). *Story*

ATMASAKTI (1905). *Essays*

BAUL (1905). *Songs*

BHARATVARSHA (1906). *Essays*

KHEYA (1906). *Verse*

NAUKADURI (1906). *Novel*

VICHITRA PRABANDHA (1907). *Essays*

CHARITRAPUJA (1907). *Essays*

PRACHIN SAHITYA (1907). *Essays*

LOKASAHITYA (1907). *Essays*

SAHITYA (1907). *Essays*

ADHUNIK SAHITYA (1907). *Essays*

HASYA-KAUTUK (1907). *Comic Plays*

VYANGAKAUTUK (1907). *Humorous Essays and Comic Plays*

PRAJAPATI NIRBANDHA (1908). *Novel*

RAJA PRAJA (1908). *Essays*

SAMUHA (1908). *Essays*

SVADES (1908). *Essays*

SAMAJ (1908). *Essays*

SARADOTSAV (1908). *Drama*

SIKSHA (1908). *Essays*

MUKUT (1908). *Drama*

SAHDATATVA (1909). *Essays*

DHARMA (1909). *Sermons*

SANTINIKETAN, Parts I-XVII (1909-1916). *Sermons*

PRAYASCHITTA (1909). *Drama*

VIDYASAGAR-CHARIT (1909?). *Essays*

GORA (1910). *Novel*

GITANJALI (1910). *Songs and Poems*

RAJA (1910). *Drama*

DAKOHAR (1912). *Drama*

GALPA CHARIT (1912). *Short Stories*

JIVANSMRITI (1912). *Autobiography*

CHHINNA PATRA (1912). *Letters*

See *Chhinnapatravali* (1960)

ACHALAYATAN (1912). *Drama*

UTSARGA (1914). *Verse*

GITI-MALYA (1914). *Songs*

- GITALI (1914). *Songs*  
 PHALOUNI (1916). *Drama*  
 GHARE-BAIRE (1916). *Novel*  
 SANCHAY (1916). *Essays*  
 PARICHAY (1916). *Essays*  
 BALAKA (1916). *Verse*  
 CHATURANGA (1916). *Novel*  
 GALPASAPTAK (1916). *Short Stories*  
 PALATAKA (1918). *Verse*  
 JAPAN-YATRI (1919). *Travel*  
 PAYLA NAMBAR (1920). *Short Stories*  
 MUKTADHARA (1922). *Drama*  
 LITIKA (1922). *Prose-poems, Allegories, Stories*  
 SISU BHOLANATH (1922). *Verse*  
 VASANTA (1923). *Musical Drama*  
 PURAVI (1925). *Verse*  
 GRIHAPRAVES (1925). *Drama*  
 PRAVAHINI (1925). *Songs*  
 CHIRAKUMAR SABHA (1926). *Comedy*  
 SODHBODH (1926). *Comedy*  
 NATIR PUJA (1926). *Drama*  
 RAKTAKARAVI (1926). *Drama*  
 LEKHAN (1927). *Epigrams*

Printed in facsimile of the poet's handwriting in 1926. *Baikali*, a collection of songs and poems, also printed in facsimile about this time, was issued many years later (1951).

- RITURANGA (1927). *Musical Drama*

- YATRI (1929). *Diary*

Consists of *Paschim-Yatrir Diary* and *Java-Yatrir Patra*, now issued separately (1961).

- YOGAYOG (1929). *Novel*

- SESHER KAVITA (1929). *Novel*

- TAPATI (1929). *Drama*

- MAHUA (1929). *Verse*

- BHANUSIMHER PATRAVALI (1930). *Letters*

- NAVIN (1931). *Musical Drama*

- RUSSIA CHITHI (1931). *Letters*

- VANAVANI (1931). *Poems and Songs*

Includes two musical dramas or song-sequences, *Rituranga* and *Navin*.

- SAPMOCHAN (1931). *Musical Drama*

- PARISESH (1932). *Verse*

- KALER YATRA (1932). *Drama*



Consists of *Rather Rasi* and *Kabir Diksha*.

PUNASCHA (1932). *Prose-Poems*

DUI BON (1933). *Novel*

MANUSHER DHARMA (1933). *Lectures*

VIGHITRITA (1933). *Verse*

GHANDALIKA (1933). *Drama*

TASER DES (1933). *Drama*

BANSARI (1933). *Drama*

BHARATPATHIK RAMMOHAN ROY (1933). *Essays and Addresses*

MALANCHI (1934). *Novel*

SRAYAN-GATHA (1934). *Musical Drama*

CHAR ADHYAY (1934). *Novel*

SESH SAPTAK (1935). *Prose-Poems*

SUR O SANGATI (1935). *Letters*

Letters on music exchanged between Rabindranath Tagore  
and Dhurjatiprasad Mukhopadhyaya.

VITHIKA (1935). *Verse*

NRITYANATYA CHITRANGADA (1936). *Dance-Drama*

PATRAPUT (1936). *Prose-Poems*

CHHANDA (1936). *Essays*

JAPANE-PARASYE (1936). *Travel*

Travels in Persia, with a new edition of *Japan-Yatri* (1919)  
under the title *Japané*.

SYAMALI (1936). *Prose-Poems*

SAHITYER PATHE (1936). *Essays*

PRAKTANI (1936). *Addresses*

KHAPCHHADA (1937). *Nonsense Rhymes*

KALANTAR (1937). *Essays*

SEY (1937). *Stories*

CHHADAR CHHABI (1937). *Verse*

VISVA-PARICHAY (1937). *Essays*

PRANTIK (1938). *Verse*

GHANDALIKA NRITYANATYA (1938). *Dance-Drama*

PATHE O PATHER PRANTE (1938). *Letters*

SENJUTI (1938). *Verse*

BANGLABHASHA PARICHAY (1938). *Essays*

PRAHASINI (1939). *Verse*

AKAS-PRAHP (1939). *Verse*

SYAMA (1939). *Dance-Drama*

PATHER SANCHAY (1939). *Essays and Letters*

NAVAYATAK (1940). *Verse*

SANAI (1940). *Verse*

CHHELEBELA (1940). *Autobiography*

- TIN SANGI (1940). *Short Stories*  
 ROGASAYYAY (1940). *Verse*  
 AROGYA (1941). *Verse*  
 JANMADINE (1941). *Verse*  
 GALPASALPA (1941). *Stories and Poems*  
 SAEHYATAR SAMKAT (1941). *Address*  
 ASRAMER RUP O VIKAS (1941). *Essays*

## PUBLISHED AFTER THE DEATH OF THE AUTHOR

- CHHADA (1941). *Verse*  
 SESH LEKHA (1941). *Verse*  
 SMRITI (1941). *Letters*  
 CHITHIPATRA I (1942). *Letters*  
 CHITHIPATRA II (1942). *Letters*  
 CHITHIPATRA III (1942). *Letters*  
 ATMAPARICHAY (1943). *Essays*  
 SAHITYER SVARUP (1943). *Essays*  
 CHITHIPATRA IV (1943). *Letters*  
 SPRULINGA (1945). *Verse*  
 CHITHIPATRA V (1945). *Letters*  
 MAHATMA GANDHI (1948). *Addresses and Essays*  
 MUKTI UPAY (1948). *Comedy*  
 VISVAHARATI (1951). *Addresses*  
 BAIKALI (1951). *Songs and Poems*

The title-page bears the date 1333 B.S.=1926. It was not however issued then: see *Lekhan* (1927).

- SAMAVAYANITI (1954). *Essays*  
 CHITRAVICHITRA (1954). *Verse*  
 ITIHAS (1955). *Essays*  
 BUDDHADEVA (1956). *Essays and Poems*  
 CHITHIPATRA VI (1957). *Letters*  
 KHRISHTA (1959). *Essays and Poems*  
 CHITHIPATRA VII (1960). *Letters*  
 CHHINNAPATRAVALI (1960). *Letters*

This new edition of *Chhinnapatra* is practically a new book. 107 letters to Indira Devi not included in *Chhinnapatra* are printed in *Chhinnapatravali*, together with fuller versions of 145 letters to Indira Devi previously published in *Chhinnapatra* in a considerably abridged form. The first eight letters in *Chhinnapatra* addressed to Srischandra Majumdar are omitted in *Chhinnapatravali*.

- PALLIPRAKRITI (1962). *Essays and Letters*  
 CHITHIPATRA VIII (1963). *Letters*

- CHITHIPATRA IX (1964). *Letters*  
 RUPANTAR (1965). *Verses*  
 SANGIT-CHINTA (1966). *Essays and Letters*  
 CHITHIPATRA X (1967). *Letters*

*Dramas: Revised, abridged or enlarged versions of earlier dramas, issued as new titles:*

- GURU (1918), a version of *Achalayatan* (1912)  
 ARUP RATAN (1920), a version of *Raja* (1910)  
 RINSEDDH (1921), a version of *Saradotsav* (1908)  
 SESH RAKSHA (1928), a version of *Godai Galad* (1892)  
 PARITRAN (1929), a version of *Prayaschitta* (1909)  
 SAMKSHIPTA VISARJAN (1961), abridged by the author in 1936  
 for boys of Santiniketan.

*Some of the dramas, enumerated under SEPARATE WORKS, are based on or deal with the same theme as of some earlier poems, short stories, novels or dramas. A list is given below, indicating in brackets the earlier writing:*

- VISARJAN, 1890 (*Rajarshi*, 1887)  
 MUKUT, 1908 (*Mukul*, a story for children, 1885)  
 PRAYASCHITTA, 1909 (*Bau-Thakuranir Hat*, 1883)  
 GRIHAPRAVES, 1925 (*Sesher Ratri*, a short story, 1914)  
 CHIRAKUMAR SABHA, 1926 (*Prajapatir Nirbandha*, 1908)  
 SODHABODH, 1926 (*Karmaphal*, 1903)  
 NATIR PUJA, 1926 (*Pujarini*, a poem in *Katha*, 1900)  
 TAPATI, 1929 (*Raja o Rani*, 1889)  
 RATHER RASI, in *Kaler Yatra*, 1932 (*Rathayatra*, published *Pravasi*,  
 Agrahayan 1330 B.S.=1923; reprinted *Rabindra-Rachanavali*,  
 22)  
 TASER DES, 1933 (*Ekta Ashadhe Galpa*, a short story, 1892)  
 Of the three dance-dramas, *Nrityanaty Chitrangada* and  
*Chandalika* *Nrityanaty* relate the same story as *Chitrangada*  
 and *Chandalika* respectively and *Syama* is based on the poem  
 'Parisodh', *Katha o Kalini*. *Sapnochan* draws upon the same  
 Buddhist legend on which *Raja* is based.  
 MUKTIR UPAY, 1948 (*Mukti U/pay*, a short story, 1892)

#### COLLECTED WORKS

- KAVYA GRANTHAVALI (Satyaprasad Gangopadhyaya, 1896)  
 A collected edition of poetical works including a selection from



early writings and translations, dramas in verse, and songs. *Malini* and *Chaitali* were first published here in book form.

**KAVYA-GRANTHA**, 9 vols. (Majumdar Library, 1903-04). Edited by Mohitchiandra Sen. Contains, besides poems which were re-arranged under new sections, songs and dramas in verse. *Smaran* and *Siru* were first published here in book form.

**RABINDRA GRANTHAVALI** (Hitavadi, 1904)

This volume, which excludes poems but includes songs, comprises short stories, novels, dramas and essays. Much of such material is however left out.

**KAVYAGRANTHA**, 10 vols. (Indian Press, 1915-16)

This collected edition of 'poetical works' includes not only verses, songs and dramas in verse, but some prose-dramas also.

**GADYA-GRANTHAVALI**, 16 vols. (1907-09)

This collected edition of prose writings, consisting of the following 16 volumes, contains mostly essays, although volumes 6 and 7 contain some humorous dramatic sketches; volume 9, two comedies; and volume 5 is a novel: 1. *Vichitra Prabandha* 2. *Prachin Sahitya* 3. *Lokasahitya* 4. *Sahitya* 5. *Adhunik Sahitya* 6. *Hasyakautuk* 7. *Vyangakautuk* 8. *Prajapatir Nirbandha* 9. *Prahasan* 10. *Raja Praja* 11. *Samuha* 12. *Svades* 13. *Samaj* 14. *Siksha* 15. *Sabdatattva* 16. *Dharma*. These books are better known as separate titles and, with the exception of volume 9, have been listed also in that group.

**RABINDRA-RACHANAVALI**, 26 vols. (Visva-Bharati, 1939-48)

Contains all works, prose and poetry, published in book form during the author's lifetime, including two volumes of poetry published soon after his death but excluding letters, and songs not occurring in dramas, etc. These 26 volumes in fact constitute the First Series; it was contemplated that some subsequent volumes would contain: (i) songs arranged chronologically; (ii) letters, only a few volumes of which were previously issued in book form, many hundreds of letters having remained unpublished; and (iii) writings not previously published in book form. A considerable amount of material coming under (iii) was included in the appendixes of these volumes.

**RABINDRA-RACHANAVALI**, vol. 27 (Visva-Bharati, May 1965)

This is in fact the first volume in the Second Series, consisting of some of the books compiled (1943-66) out of uncollected material after the poet's death enumerated above.

**RABINDRA-RACHANAVALI**, AGHALITA SANGRAHA, 2 vols. (Visva-Bharati, 1940-41)

These are companion volumes to *Rabindra-Rachanaivali*; they

consist chiefly of volumes of early writings later discontinued, and derive the sub-title from this fact. The second volume includes text-books written by Tagore.

RABINDRA-RACHANAVALI, 15 vols. (Government of West Bengal, 1961-67) A rearranged edition issued on the occasion of the Tagore Centenary.

GALPAGUCHCHHA, 4 parts (Visva-Bharati, one volume edition, 1964). *Short Stories*.

This edition covers the entire corpus of the author's short stories, *Galpaguchchha* was first published in two parts, in 1900-01, and was followed in 1908-09 by an enlarged edition in five volumes. The Visva-Bharati published in 1926 a further enlarged edition in three volumes, and a fourth volume was published in 1962.

GRAVITAN, 3 parts (Visva-Bharati, latest one volume edition, 1967) *Songs, Musical Dramas and Drance-Dramas*.

This edition includes the entire corpus of Tagore's songs so far traced. Earlier collected editions of songs include *Ganer Bani o Valmiki Pratibha* (1893), *Gan* (1908; 1909; this edition subsequently in two volumes, *Gan* and *Dharmasangit*).

RITU-UTSAV (1926). 'Season'-Dramas and song-sequences.

Comprises *Sesh Varshan*, *Saradotsav*, *Vasanta*, *Sundar* and *Phalguni*.

PATRADHARA (1938). *Letters*.

Comprises *Chhinnapatra*, *Bhanusimher Patravali* and *Pathe o Pather Pranto*.

## ANTHOLOGIES

SVADES (1905). *Patriotic Poems and Songs*.

Subsequent edition issued under the title *Sankalpa o Svades*.

CHAYANIKA (1909). *Poems and Songs*.

SAMKALAN (1925). *Prose writings, other than fiction*.

SANCHAYITA (1931). *Poems, Songs and Verse-dramas*.

Selected by the author, and published on the occasion of Tagore Septuagenary celebrations. *Sanchayan* (1947) is practically a shorter edition of *Sanchayita*.

VICHITRA (May 1961).

An anthology, covering practically all aspects of Tagore's literary contribution, published on the occasion of his birth centenary.

DIPKA (May 1963)

An anthology on the lines of *Vichitra*.

## TRANSLATIONS FROM ENGLISH

VYAKTIVA (1951). *Essays*

A translation of *Personality* (1917)

Translated by Saumyendranath Tagore.

RABINDRA-ANDREWS PATRAVALI (1967). *Letters*

A translation of *Letters to a Friend* (1928)

Translated by Malina Ray.

## ENGLISH

## SEPARATE WORKS

GITANJALI (Song Offerings). London: The India Society. 1912.

*Poems.*

Prose translations by the author of a selection of poems from *Gitanjali*, *Nâivedya*, *Kheya*, *Gitimalya*, etc.

GLIMPSES OF BENGAL LIFE. Madras: G. A. Natesan. 1913. *Short Stories.*

CONTENTS: The Fruit-seller (*Kabuliwalla*); The School Closes (*Chhuti*); A Resolve Accomplished (*Panraksha*); The Dumb Girl (*Subha*); The Wandering Guest (*Atithi*); The Look Auspicious (*Subhadrishti*); A Study in Anatomy (*Kankal*); The Landing Stairway (*Ghater Katha*); The Sentence (*Saifi*); The Expiation (*Prayaschitta*); The Golden Mirage (*Svarnamriga*); The Trespass (*Anadhikar Prabes*); The Hungry Stones (*Kshudhita Pashan*).

Translated by Rajani Ranjan Sen.

The translator's Introduction is dated June, 1913.

THE GARDENER. London: Macmillan. [October] 1913. *Poems.*

Prose translations by the author of a selection of poems from *Kshanika*, *Kalpana*, *Sonar Tari*, etc.

SADHANA. London: Macmillan. [October] 1913. *Essays and Lectures.*

CONTENTS: The Relation of the Individual to the Universe; Soul Consciousness; The Problem of Evil; The Problem of Self; Realisation in Love; Realisation in Action; The Realisation of Beauty; and The Realisation of the Infinite.

"These papers embody ... ideas which have been culled from several of the Bengali discourses ... to my students in my school at Bolpur ... 'Realisation in Action' has been translated from my Bengali discourse on 'Karma-yoga' by ... Surendranath Tagore." Most of these papers were read by the author before



Harvard University.

THE CRESCENT MOON. London: Macmillan. [November] 1913.  
*Child-Poems.*

Translations by the author of poems mostly from *Sisu*.

CHITRA. London: The India Society. 1913. *Drama.*

A translation of *Chitrangada*.

THE KING OF THE DARK CHAMBER. London: Macmillan. 1914.  
*Drama.*

A translation of *Raja*.

Translated by K. C. Sen.

The translation is erroneously attributed to the author in the title-page.

THE POST OFFICE. Churchtown, Dundrum, County Dublin: The Cuala Press. [July] 1914. *Drama.*

A translation of *Dakghar*.

Translated by Devabrata Mukhopadhyaya.

FRUIT-GATHERING. London: Macmillan. [October] 1916. *Poems.*  
Translations of a selection of poems from *Gitanjali*, *Gitali*, *Balaka*, etc.

*Fruit-Gathering* was issued together with *Gitanjali* under the title *Gitanjali and Fruit-Gathering* by Macmillan (New York) in September 1918, with illustrations by Nandalal Bose, Surendranath Kar, Abanindranath Tagore and Nabendranath Tagore.

HUNGRY STONES AND OTHER STORIES. London: Macmillan. 1916.  
CONTENTS: The Hungry Stones (*Kshudhita Pashan*); The Victory (*Jay-Parajay*); Once there was a King (*Asambhav Katha*); The Home Coming (*Chhuti*); My Lord, the Baby (*Khokababur Pratyabartan*); The Kingdom of Cards (*Ekta Ashadhe Galpa*); The Devotee (*Boshtami*); Vision (*Drishtidan*); The Babus of Nayanjore (*Thakurda*); Living or Dead (*Jivita o Mrita*); We Crown Thee King (*Rajtika*); The Renunciation (*Tyag*); The Cabuliwallah (*Kabuliwallah*).

Translated by various writers.

STRAY BIRDS. New York: Macmillan. [November] 1916. *Epigrams.*

MY REMINISCENCES. London: Macmillan. 1917. *Autobiography.*

A translation of *Jivansmriti*.

[Translated by Surendranath Tagore]

SACRIFICE AND OTHER PLAYS. London: Macmillan. 1917.

CONTENTS: Sanyasi or The Asectic (*Prakritir Pratisodh*); Malini (*Malini*); Sacrifice (*Visarjan*); The King and The Queen (*Raja o Rani*).

THE CYCLE OF SPRING. London: Macmillan. 1917. *Drama.*

A translation of *Phalguni*.

'The greater part of the introductory portion of this drama was translated by Mr. C. F. Andrews and Prof. Nishikanta Sen and revised by the author.'

NATIONALISM. London: Macmillan. 1917. *Essays*.

CONTENTS: Nationalism in the West; Nationalism in Japan; Nationalism in India.

The series is followed by 'The Sunset of the Century', adapted from some poems of *Naivedya*.

PERSONALITY. London: Macmillan. 1917. *Lectures delivered in America*.

CONTENTS: What is Art; The World of Personality; My School; Meditation; Woman.

LOVER'S GIFT AND CROSSING. London: Macmillan. 1918. *Poems and Songs*.

Translations of a selection of poems and songs from *Balaka*, *Kshanika*, *Kheya*, etc.

MASHI AND OTHER STORIES. London: Macmillan. 1918.

CONTENTS: Mashi (*Sesher Ratri*); The Skeleton (*Kankal*); The Auspicious Vision (*Subhadrishti*); The Supreme Night (*Ek Ratri*); Raja and Rani (*Sadar o Andar*); The Trust Property (*Sampatti-Samarpan*); The Riddle Solved (*Samasya-Puran*); The Elder Sister (*Didi*); Subha (*Subha*); The Postmaster (*Postmaster*); The River Stairs (*Ghater Katha*); The Castaway (*Apad*); Saved (*Uddhar*); My Fair Neighbour (*Pratibesini*).

Translated by various writers.

THE PARROT'S TRAINING. Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co. 1918. *Allegorical Satire*.

A translation of 'Tota-Kahini', *Lipika*.

Translated by the author.

A new edition of the book, issued under the title *The Parrot's Training and Other Stories* (Visva-Bharati, October 1944) includes Trial of the Horse ('Ghoda', *Lipika*: trs. Surendranath Tagore), Old Man's Ghost ('Kartar Bhut', *Lipika*: trs. Amiya Chakravarty), and Great News ('Bado Khabar', *Galpasalpa*: trs. Amiya Chakravarty).

THE HOME AND THE WORLD. London: Macmillan. 1919. *Novel*.

A translation of *Ghare Baire*.

Translated by Surendranath Tagore.

THE FUGITIVE. Santiniketan: Santiniketan Press. 1919?. *Poems*.

Translations of a selection of poems from various books.

This is not identical with *The Fugitive* (1921), and was for private circulation.

GREATER INDIA. Madras: S. Ganesan. 1921. *Essays*.

- CONTENTS: Our Swadeshi Samaj (*Swadeshi Samaj*); The Way to get it done (*Saphalatar Sadupay*); The One Nationalist Party (*Sabhapatir Abhibhashan, Pabna Sammilani*, in part); East and West in Greater India (*Purva o Paschim*).
- THE WRECK. London: Macmillan. 1921. *Novel*.  
A translation of *Naikadubi*.
- GLIMPSES OF BENGAL. London: Macmillan. 1921. *Letters*.  
Translation of a selection from *Chhinnapatra*.  
Translated by Surendranath Tagore.
- THE FUGITIVE. London: Macmillan. 1921. *Poems and Songs*.  
Translations of a selection of poems and songs from *Manasi*, *Sonar Tari*, *Gitanalya*, etc., and sketches from *Lipika*.  
It also includes translations of the following dramas: *Kacha* and *Devayani* (*Viday-Abhisap*); and, from *Kahini*, *Ama* and *Vinayaka* (*Sati*), *The Mother's Prayer* (*Gandharit Avedan*), *Soniaka* and *Ritvik* (*Narakbat*), *Karna* and *Kunti* (*Karna-Kunti-Samvad*); and translations of a selection of *Vaishnava* and *Baul* songs, and *Hindi* songs of *Jnanadas*.
- THOUGHT RELICS. New York: Macmillan. March 1921.  
A new and enlarged edition of the book, edited by C. F. Andrews, was published by Macmillan (London) in 1929 under the title *Thoughts from Tagore*.
- CREATIVE UNITY. London: Macmillan. 1922. *Essays and Lectures*.  
CONTENTS: The Poet's Religion; The Creative Ideal; The Religion of the Forest: An Indian Folk Religion; East and West; The Modern Age; The Spirit of Freedom; The Nation; Woman and Home; An Eastern University.
- LETTERS FROM ABROAD. Madras: S. Ganesan. 1924. *Letters*.  
Letters to C. F. Andrews written during May 1920—July 1921.
- GORA. London: Macmillan. 1924. *Novel*.  
A translation of *Gora*.  
Translated by W. W. Pearson.
- THE CURSE AT FAREWELL. London: G. Harrap. 1924. *Drama*.  
A translation of *Viday-Abhisap*.  
Translated by Edward Thompson.
- THE AUGUSTAN BOOK OF MODERN POETRY: RABINDRANATH TAGORE.  
London: Ernest Benn. 1925.  
Translations of 21 poems and 12 epigrams.  
Translated by Edward Thompson.
- TALES IN CHINA. Calcutta. February 1925. *Addresses*.  
CONTENTS: Autobiographical; To My Hosts; To Students; To Teachers; Leave Taking; Civilisation And Progress; Satyam.
- RED OLEANDERS. London: Macmillan. 1925. *Drama*.



A translation of *Raktakaravi*.

BROKEN TIES AND OTHER STORIES. London: Macmillan, 1925.

CONTENTS: Broken Ties (*Chaturanga*); In the Night (*Nisithe*); The Fugitive Gold (*Starnamriga*); The Editor (*Sampadak*); Giribala (*Manbhanjan*); The Lost Jewels (*Manihara*); Emancipation (from *Parisoth*, a poem).

FIREFLIES. New York: Macmillan, 1928. *Epigrams*.

'Fireflies had their origin in China and Japan where thoughts were very often claimed from me in my handwriting on fans and pieces of silk.'

LETTERS TO A FRIEND. London: Allen & Unwin, 1928.

Letters to G. F. Andrews.

This volume which consists of letters written during the years 1913-1922, is a revised and enlarged edition of *Letters from Abroad* (1924) consisting of letters written during 1920-21.

FIFTEEN POEMS OF RABINDRANATH TAGORE. Bombay: K. C. Sen. [1928].

Translations, in verse, of 15 poems from *Balaka*.

Translated by K. C. S. [Kshitichandra Sen]. For private circulation.

SHEAVES. Allahabad: Indian Press, 1929. *Poems and Songs*.

Selected and translated by Nagendranath Gupta.

THE CHILD. London: Allen & Unwin, 1931. *Poem*.

The Bengali version of this poem is 'Sisutirtha', *Punascha*, the English version being earlier.

THE RELIGION OF MAN. London: Allen & Unwin, 1931. *Lectures*.

'The chapters included in this book, which comprises the Hibbert Lectures, delivered in Oxford, at Manchester College, during the month of May 1930, contain also the gleanings of my thoughts on the same subject from the harvest of many lectures and addresses delivered in different countries of the world over a considerable period of my life.'

The Appendices include, among other things, 'Note on the Nature of Reality', being a conversation between Tagore and Einstein on July 14, 1930, and 'An Address in the Chapel of Manchester College, Oxford, on May 25, 1930, by Rabindranath Tagore'.

THE GOLDEN BOAT. London: Allen & Unwin, 1932.

Contains translations principally of pieces from *Lipika*, and of a selection of poems.

Translated by Bhabani Bhattacharya.

MAHATMAJI AND THE DEPRESSED HUMANITY. Calcutta: Visva-

Bharati. December 1932. *Addresses*.

Addresses, statements, etc. on the occasion of Mahatma Gandhi's 'epic fast' in September 1932. The book includes Bengali versions of some of the addresses.

MAN. Waltair: Andhra University. 1937.

Lectures delivered at Andhra University.

MY BOYHOOD DAYS. Santiniketan: Visva-Bharati. [December 1940]. *Autobiography*.

A translation of *Chhelebola*.

Translated by Marjorie Sykes.

CRISIS IN CIVILIZATION. Santiniketan: Visva-Bharati. May 1941. *Address*.

A Message on completing his eighty years.

#### PUBLISHED AFTER THE DEATH OF THE AUTHOR

POEMS. Calcutta: Visva-Bharati. February, 1942.

Translations are by the author, with the exception of the last nine poems, translated by Amiya Chakravarty. The poems cover all major divisions in the poet's writings, 1886-1941.

In the Notes appended to the book, the title (or the first line) of the original Bengali composition and the book in which it first appeared are given. Wherever possible the year of the original composition has been indicated, failing which the year of the publication of the book in which it first appeared.

Edited by Krishna Kripalani in collaboration with Amiya Chakravarty, Nirmalchandra Chattopadhyaya and Pulinbihari Sen.

TWO SISTERS. Calcutta: Visva-Bharati. December, 1945. *Novel*.

A translation of *Dui Bon*.

Translated by Krishna Kripalani.

FAREWELL, MY FRIEND. London: The New India Publishing Company. [1949]. *Novel*.

A translation of *Sesher Kavita*.

Translated by Krishna Kripalani.

A new edition of the book (*Farewell, my Friend and the Garden*, Bombay: Jaico, August 1956) includes a translation, by Krishna Kripalani, of *Malancha*.

THREE PLAYS. Bombay: Oxford University Press. 1950.

Comprises translations of *Mukta-Dhara*, *Natir Puja* and *Chandalika*.

Translated by Marjorie Sykes.

FOUR CHAPTERS. Calcutta: Visva-Bharati. September 1950. *Novel*.

A translation of *Char Adhyay*.

Translated by Surendranath Tagore.

A TAGORE TESTAMENT. London: Meridian Books. 1953. *Autobiographical Essays*.

Translations of essays included in *Atmaparichay*, together with some poems selected by the translator to introduce the essays.

Translated by Indu Dutt.

A FLIGHT OF SWANS. London: John Murray. 1955. *Poems*.

Translations of poems from *Balaka* and the poem 'Matri-Abhishek' ('He Mor Chitta'), *Gitanjali*.

Translated by Aurobindo Bose.

SYAMALI. Calcutta: Visva-Bharati. September 1955. *Poems*.

A translation of *Syamali*.

Translations by Sheila Chatterjee, with the exception of 'The Eternal March', translated by the author.

THE HERALD OF SPRING. London: John Murray. 1957.

Translations of poems from *Mahua*.

Translated by Aurobindo Bose.

OUR UNIVERSE. London: Meridian Books. 1958. *A Science Primer*.

A translation of *Visva-Parichaya*, with some poems included by the translator to introduce the chapters.

Translated by Indu Dutt.

BINODINI. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi. March 1959. *Novel*.

A translation of *Chokher Bali*.

Translated by Krishna Kripalani.

THE RUNAWAY AND OTHER STORIES. Calcutta: Visva-Bharati. May 1959.

CONTENTS: The Runaway (*Atithi*); The Hidden Treasure (*Guptadhan*); Cloud and Sun (*Megh o Raudra*); False Hopes (*Durasa*); The Judge (*Vicharak*); Mahamaya (*Mahamaya*); Trespass (*Anadhikar Prabes*); The Conclusion (*Samapti*); The Stolen Treasure (*Chorai Dhan*).

Translated by various writers.

WINGS OF DEATH. London: John Murray. 1960. *Poems*.

Translations of poems from *Prantik*, *Rogajayay*, *Arogya* and *Sesh Lekha*.

Translated by Aurobindo Bose.

POEMS FROM PURAVI. Santiniketan: Uma Roy. 8 May 1960.

Six poems from *Puravi* and one from *Sesh Lekha*.

Translated by Kshitis Roy. For private circulation.

LETTERS FROM RUSSIA. Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, September 1960.

A translation of *Russian Chithi*.

Translated by Sasadhar Sinha.

An account of Tagore in Russia, based on notes kept by Amiya



Chakravarty and other members of the poet's party, is printed in the appendix.

NATIR PUJA (THE COURT DANCER). Calcutta: Writers Workshop. 1961. *Drama*.

A translation of *Natir Puja*.

Translated by Shyamasree Devi. For private circulation.

A VISIT TO JAPAN. New York: East West Institute. May 1961. *Travel*.

A translation of *Japan-Yatri*, published 'in commemoration of Tagore Centenary'.

Translated by Shakuntala Rao Sastri.

DEVOURING LOVE. New York: East West Institute. May 1961. *Drama*.

A translation of *Raja o Rani*, published 'in commemoration of Tagore Centenary'.

Translated by Shakuntala Rao Sastri.

A BUNCH OF POEMS. Calcutta: Writers Workshop [1962]

Translation of five poems from *Syamali*.

Translated by Monika Verma.

MAHATMA GANDHI. Calcutta: Visva-Bharati. January 1963. *Essays and Discussion*.

THE CO-OPERATIVE PRINCIPAL. Visva-Bharati. February 1963. *Essay and Discussion*.

CHATURANGA. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi. December 1963.

A translation of *Chaturanga*.

Translated by Asok Mitra.

#### ANTHOLOGIES AND COLLECTED WORKS

STORIES FROM TAGORE. Calcutta: Macmillan. 1918 ?

CONTENTS: The Cabuliwallah; The Home-Coming; Once there was a King; The Child's Return (My Lord, the Baby); and The Babus of Nayanjore, from *Hungry Stones and Other Stories*. Subha; The Postmaster; and The Castaway, from *Mashi and Other Stories*.

Master Mashai (*Master Masay*) and The Son of Rashmani (*Rasmanir Chhele*), first published in this book.

The selection is intended for use in schools.

POEMS FROM TAGORE. Calcutta: Macmillan. 1922 ?

An anthology of poems and songs compiled from the following: *Gitanjali*; *The Gardener*; *The Crescent Moon*; *Fruit-Gathering*; songs from *The Cycle of Spring*; *Stray Birds*; *Lover's Gift*; *Crossing*; and *The Fugitive*.

With an introduction by C. F. Andrews.

The selection is intended primarily for use in schools and colleges in India.

LECTURES AND ADDRESSES by Rabindranath Tagore. London: Macmillan. 1928.

Selected from the speeches of the poet by Anthony X. Soares. CONTENTS: My Life, from *Talks in China*; My School, from *Personality*; Civilization and Progress, from *Talks in China*; Construction *versus* Creation, an address delivered at the Gujarati Literary Conference, Ahmedabad, 1920; What is Art?, from *Personality*; Nationalism in India, from *Nationalism*; International Relations, a lecture delivered in Japan (1924); The Voice of Humanity, an address given at Milan (1925); and The Realization of the Infinite, from *Sadhana*.

THE TAGORE BIRTHDAY BOOK. London: Macmillan. 1928.

Selected from the English Works of Rabindranath Tagore.

Edited by G. F. Andrews.

COLLECTED POEMS AND PLAYS OF RABINDRANATH TAGORE. London: Macmillan 1936.

CONTENTS: *Gitanjali*, *The Crescent Moon*, *The Gardener*, *Chitra*, *Fruit-Gathering*, *The Post Office*, *Lover's Gift*, *Crossing*, *Stray Birds*, *The Cycle of Spring*, *The Fugitive and other Poems*; *Sacrifice and Other Plays*; and *Karna and Kunti* from *The Fugitive*.

While some of the books have not been reprinted in full, the 'other poems' added to *The Fugitive* include the following poems not published before in any other book: This Evil Day; Borobudur; Fulfilment; The Son of Man; Raidas, the Sweeper; Freedom; The New Year; Krishnakali; W. W. Pearson; and Santiniketan Song.

YOUR TAGORE FOR TO-DAY. Bombay: People's Publishing House. September 1945.

Edited by Hirankumar Sanyal.

Selections translated by Hirendranath Mukherjee.

A TAGORE READER. New York: Macmillan. [April] 1961.

An anthology, edited by Amiya Chakravarty, published in observance of the Centennial of Tagore's birthday. The selections appear under the following headings: Travel, Letters, Short stories, Autobiographical Writings, Conversations, Fables, Drama, On India, On Education, Art and Literary Criticism, Philosophical Meditations and Poetry, and include some new translations by the editor, whose introductory prefaces to each section include relevant information concerning the context in which the original material was written, brief discussions of the contents

of the section, and facts concerning translations and publications.

TOWARDS UNIVERSAL MAN. Bombay: Asia Publishing House. 7 May 1961. *Essays*.

A selection of essays on social, economic, political and educational topics to indicate Tagore's contributions in those fields, prepared by the Tagore Commemorative Volume Society, New Delhi, on the occasion of the Centenary of Tagore's birth.

CONTENTS: The Vicissitudes of Education (*Sikshar Herpher*); Society and State (*Swadeshi Samaj*); The Problem of Education (*Siksha-Samasya*) What Then? (*Tatah Kim*); Presidential Address [at Pabna] (*Sabhapati Abhibhashan*); East and West (*Purva o Paschim*); Hindu University (*Hindu Visvavidyalaya*); On the Eve of Departure (*Yatrar Purvapatra*); The Master's Will be Done (*Kartar Ichchhay Karma*); The Centre of Indian Culture; The Unity of Education (*Sikshar Milan*); The Call of Truth (*Satyer Ahwan*); The Striving for Swaraj (*Swaraj Sadhan*); A Poet's School; City and Village (partly, *Palli-Prakriti*); Co-operation (*Samavaya I and Samavayaniti*); The Changing Age (*Kalantar*) and Crisis in Civilization (*Sabhyatar Samkat*).

With an Introduction by Humayun Kabir, and Notes by Kshitish Roy on the essays, indicating the Bengali originals, the dates of their first publication and occasions of some of the addresses.

TAGORE AND MAN. Calcutta: Tagore Centenary Peace Festival All India Committee, November 1961.

An anthology of writings bearing on national freedom and international understanding, humanism and peace.

THE WAYFARING POET. Calcutta: Dunlop. December 1961.

An anthology with the theme of Tagore as a traveller.

BOUNDLESS SKY. Calcutta: Visva-Bharati. May 1964.

An anthology of short stories (8), essays (14), poems (49), a drama and a novel.

FAITH OF A POET. Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan. August 1964.

Some essays and addresses arranged in three tiers, India, the world and thoughts on education.

Edited by Sisirkumar Ghosh.

THE HOUSEWARMING AND OTHER SELECTED WRITINGS. New York: The New American Library. 1965.

An Anthology of short stories (19), plays (2), fables and prose sketches (6) and narrative poems (5).

Edited by Amiya Chakravarty.

Translated by Mary Lago, Tarun Gupta and the Editor.



TAGORE FOR YOU. Calcutta: Visva-Bharati. May 1966.

An anthology of essays and addresses, parables, letters and poems.  
Edited by Sisir Kumar Ghosh.

ONE HUNDRED AND ONE. Bombay: Asia Publishing House. 1966.

The editor writes in his preface: "It is true that a large number of poems of Tagore have already been translated into English, and many of them by the poet himself, but it is equally true that the poems selected for translation have generally been of one type and not fully representative of Tagore's many splendoured genius.

"The earliest poem in this anthology is contained in a book published in 1881. The last poem was composed in 1941 barely a week before Tagore's death. They cover an expanse of sixty years and as the reader will see for himself show great imaginative sweep and energy and an amazing variety of interests..."

Translations are by: Abu Sayeed Ayyub, Amalendu Bose, Amalendu Das Gupta, Amiya Chakravarty, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Buddhadeva Bose, Chidananda Das Gupta, Hiren Mukherji, Humayun Kabir, J. C. Ghosh, Kshitis Roy, Lila Ray, Monika Verma, Samar Sen, Sisir K. Ghosh, Somnath Moitra, Tarak Sen, and V. S. Naravane.

Edited by Humayan Kabir.

MOON, FOR WHAT DO YOU WAIT? New York: Atheneum. 1967.

A selection from *Stray Birds*.

Edited by Richard Lewis.

### JOINT PUBLICATIONS

THE VISVABHARATI. Rabindranath and [C. F.] Andrews. Madras: Natesan. April 1923. *Essays*.

Tagore contributed:

The Visva-Bharati Ideal, pp. 1-26.

EAST AND WEST. Gilbert Murray and Rabindranath Tagore, Paris: International Institute of Intellectual Co-operation, League of Nations. 1935.

Two open letters exchanged between Gilbert Murray and Rabindranath Tagore.

RABINDRANATH TAGORE, Pioneer in Education. London: John Murray. 1961. *Essays and Exchanges* between Rabindranath Tagore and L. K. Elmhirst.

The following writings and discourses of Rabindranath Tagore are included in this book: A Poet's School; The Philosophical

Approach to Sriniketan; The Parrot's Training; and The Art of Movement in Education.

Letters from Tagore appear on pp. 17, 23, 27-30, 33-34, 36-38, 43.

Tagore's conversations are reported in Mr. Elmhirst's Preface and his essay 'The Foundation of Sriniketan.'

TRUTH CALLED THEM DIFFERENTLY. Rabindranath and Mahatma Gandhi. Ahmedabad: Navajivan. July 1961.

The following essays, discourses and statements of Rabindranath Tagore are included in this book: Who is Mahatma?; A Liberated Soul; Non-co-operation, a form of 'Himsa'; Rammohun Roy 'not a pigmy'; The Call of Truth; The Cult of the Charkha; The Bihar Earthquake; Mahatma Gandhi; Gandhi the Man; A Last Appeal.

#### BOOK EDITED BY TAGORE

ONE HUNDRED POEMS OF KABIR. London: The India Society, 1914.

#### LIMITED AND SPECIAL EDITIONS

Three of Tagore's earliest books published in England or Ireland were issued in a limited edition: *Gitanjali*, *Chitra* and *The Post Office*. 750 copies each of *Gitanjali* and *Chitra* were printed for the India Society, of which 250 only were for sale. The Cuala Press edition of *The Post Office* consisted of 400 numbered copies.

BOLPUR EDITION: In October 1916, Macmillan (New York) issued a set of 10 volumes in a uniform 'Bolpur Edition', comprising books published by them till then: *Gitanjali*, *The Gardener*, *Sadhana*, *The Crescent Moon*, *Chitra*, *The King of the Dark Chamber*, *The Post Office*, *Fruit-Gathering*, *The Hungry Stones and Other Stories*, and *Songs of Kabir* (One Hundred Poems of Kabir).

#### BOOK BASED ON TAGORE STORY

MAHARANI OF ARAKAN. George Calderon. London: Francis Griffiths. 1915. *A Romantic Comedy in One Act*.  
Founded on Tagore's short story *Dalia*.

This bibliography was first published in *Rabindranath Tagore 1861-1961* (Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, November 1961), and has now been brought up to date.





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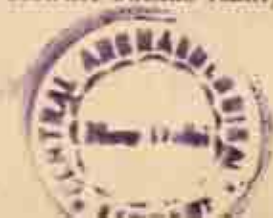


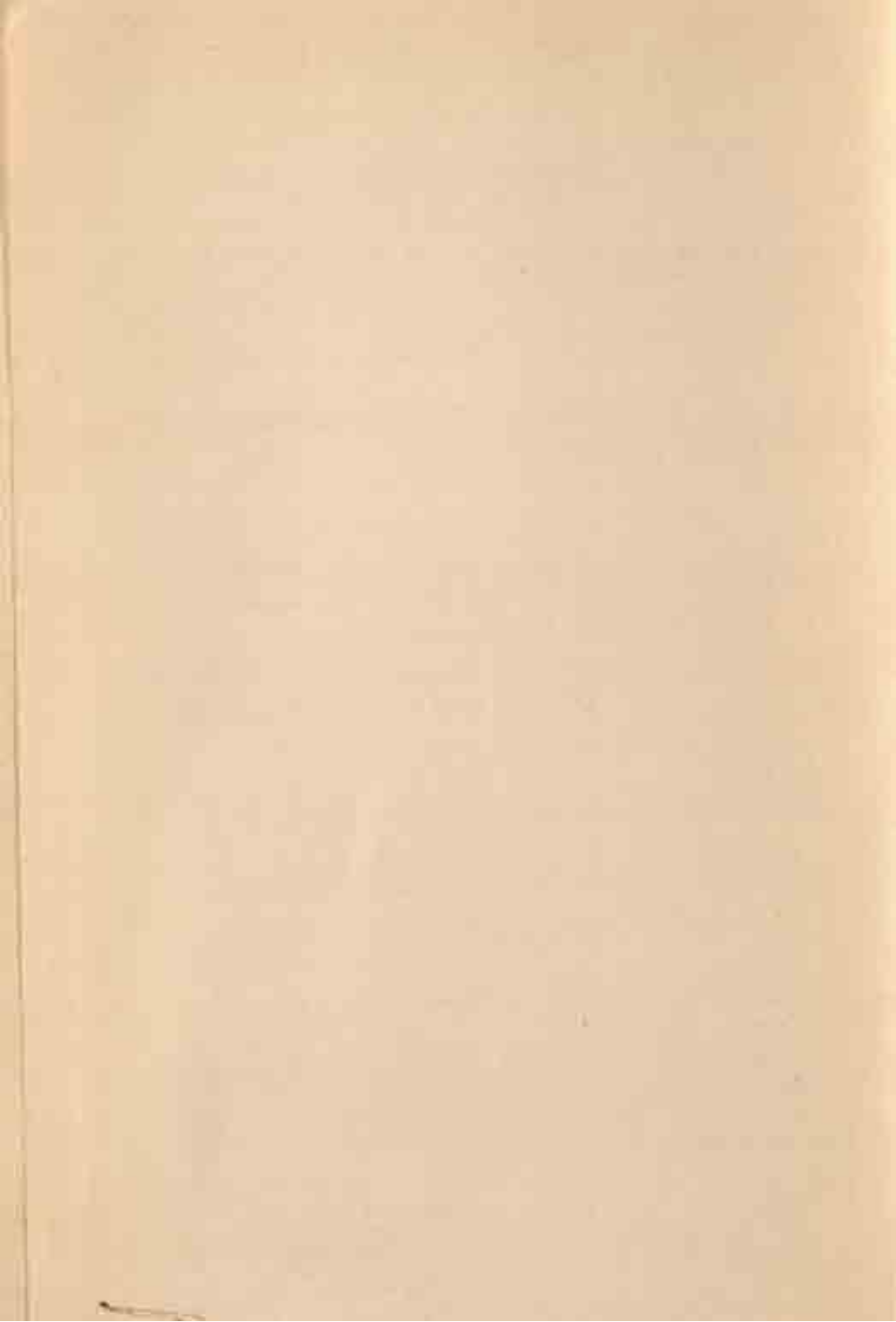
## A List of Errors

*In this list only such of the detected misprints have been included as are likely to cause confusion.*

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94	footnote	Sannyasi of	Sannyasi or
130	21	ever-ripe	over-ripe
137	23	massage	message
148	11	games	gems
148	35	hunting	haunting
150	39	For what	For that
155	32	It is an	It is not an
155	34	mobility	nobility
156	13	the	he
172	1	wonderer	wanderer
176	36	continued	confined
252	11	of a being	of being
269	16	being	begins
272	11	construction	constriction
273	9	it runs	they run
274	7	theme of	theme or
299	32	kept in them	kept them

Page 417, footnote. The first sentence should read: 'It is not true that I do not have any special love for my country, but when it is in its normal state it does not obstruct outside reality ; ...'









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